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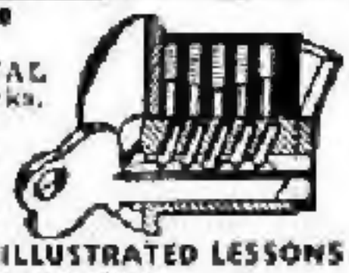

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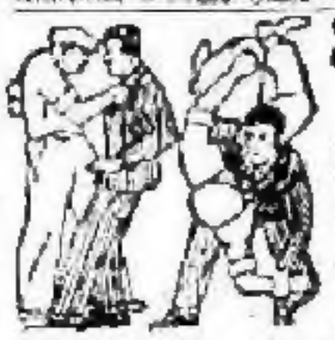

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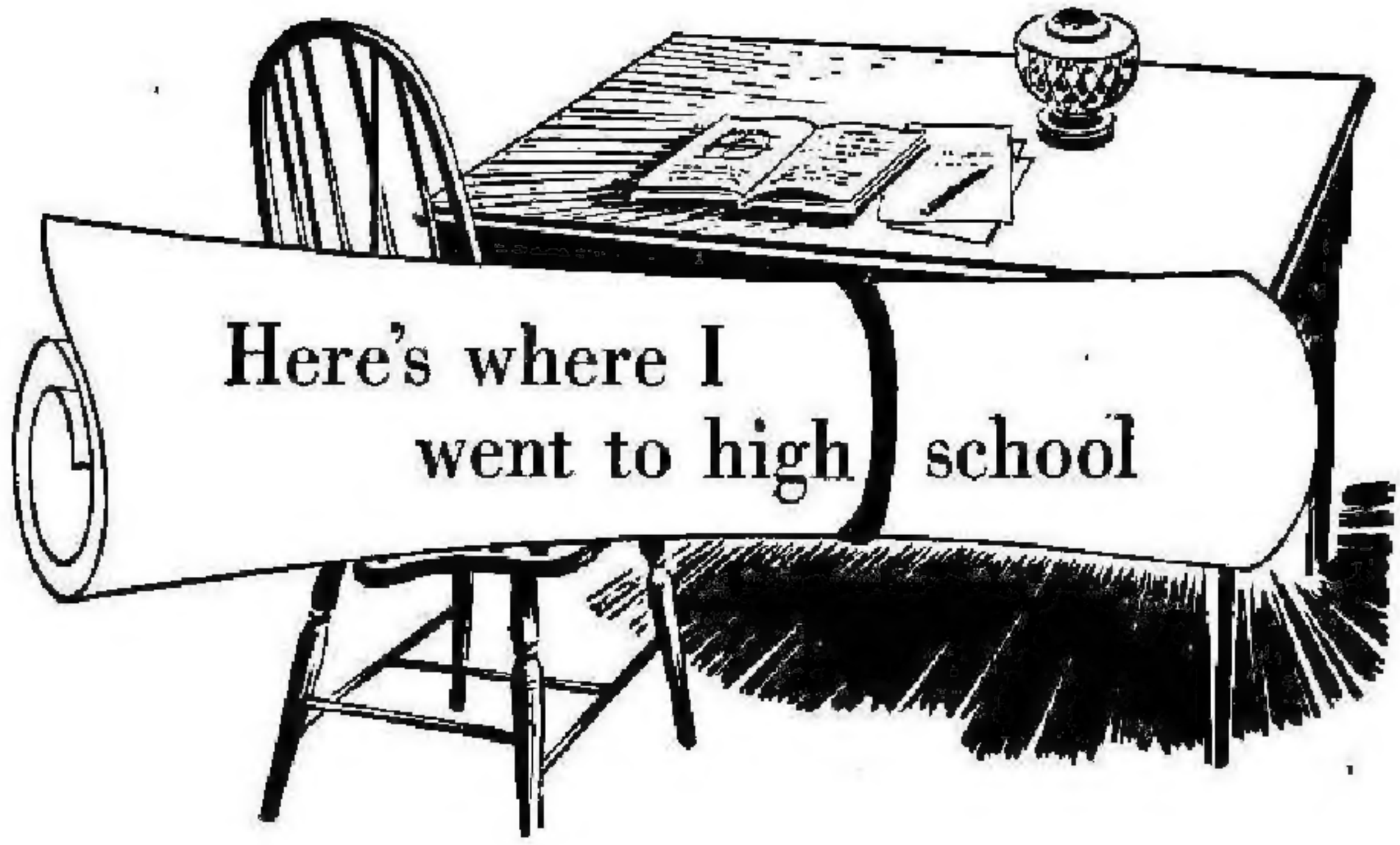

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Vol. 3, No. 3 A THRILLING PUBLICATION SPRING, 1952

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Black Margot was half sweet, provocative goddess—and half brutal devil who would endeavor to steal all his knowledge and his heart

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The story behind Weinbaum's "Dawn of Flame" and "Black Flame"

SAMUEL MINES, *Editor*

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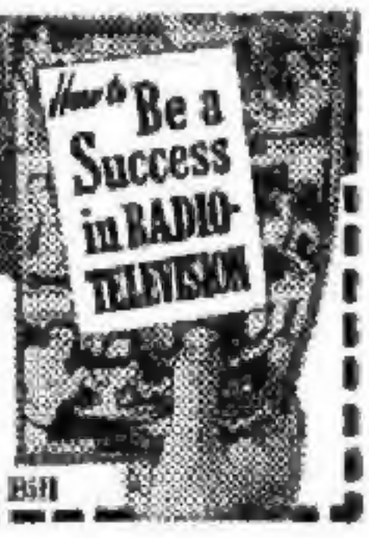

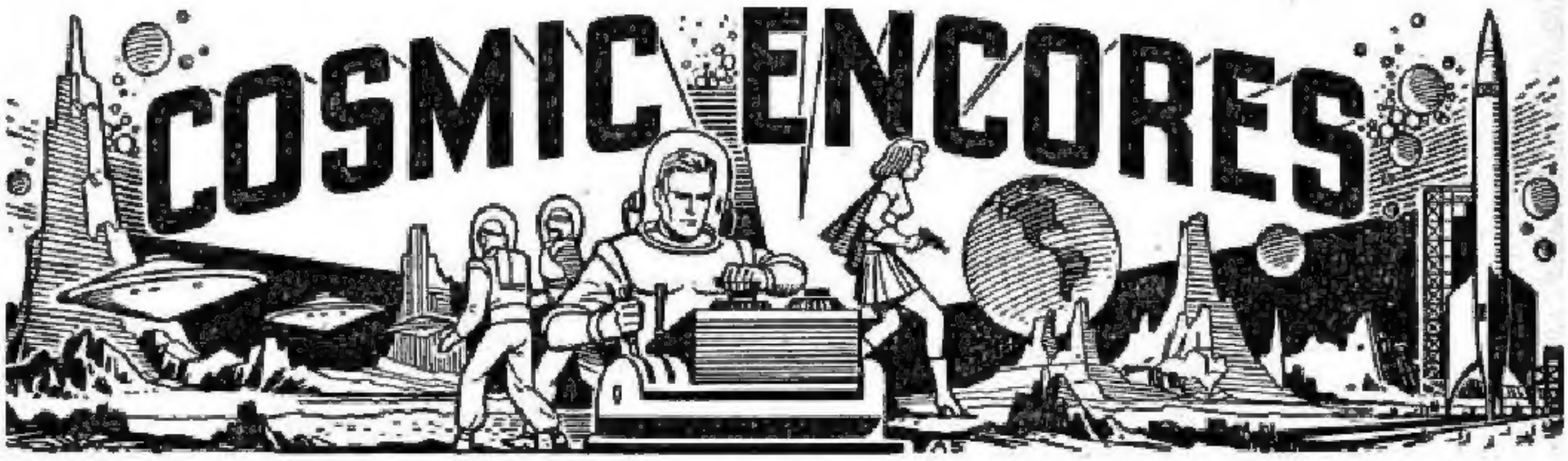

A DEPARTMENT WHERE SCIENCE FICTION READERS AND THE EDITOR MEET

EVERY so often a letter arrives from a reader which says in effect:

"Dear Ed: Why don't you get hold of some of the science-fiction stories being written in Europe? After all, France gave us Jules Verne and Germany gave us the V-2 and the *Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* and how do you know what you're missing if you don't try?"

It sounded reasonable. European writers had a long background in fantasy and fairy tale—think of Pinocchio and Little Red Riding Hood and Hans Christian Andersen and the brothers Grimm. Maybe we were missing something. Science fiction, there, we considered, might even be far ahead of the American brand.

Of course there was the cost of having it read and translated, but nothing was too good for our readers. So we imported some books and arranged to have them read and then we discussed the field with some visiting literary figures from Germany and points west.

To make it brief: we were badly disappointed. European fiction lags about fifteen years behind us.

English Science Fiction

This applies to the French and German writers, not to the English. We've imported English stories for a long time and their writers are right up in front with ours. In recent issues of our magazines we've had THE STAR WATCHERS by Eric Frank Russell, TWO SHADOWS by William Temple, LOST ART by A. Bertram Chandler, and further back, AGAINST THE FALL OF NIGHT by Arthur C. Clarke, all top quality fiction.

Another country with a literary tradition is Russia, but here imagination runs headlong into proletarian practicalities which spurns pie in the sky, and gets itself *verboten*. After all, science fiction draws a picture of a world in which politics is a dead duck and science rules. This, the comrades suggest, is unrealistic. And who needs science if you've got Stalin?

So that leaves America and England, and as we thought about this a pattern began to take form in our mind.

It has been said that the first scrap of English writing ever discovered concerned adventure—man's conquest of savage nature or more savage men. The first scrap of French writing ever discovered, concerned, ah, yes, l'amour.

This is only a joke in questionable taste. But it is true that going back to Beowulf and Chaucer and the legends of King Arthur the English-speaking peoples developed a background tradition of lusty, imaginative adventure completely different from the neurotic Nibelung legends of the Germans. At the same time the romantic Latin races became more introverted, delved within themselves and wrestled with their emotions and souls and the problems of personality.

American writers caught the flavor of the English tradition. Washington Irving created imperishable fantasy with his headless horseman in "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" and topped it with Rip Van Winkle. Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote some fine short fantasies and more recently Robert W. Chambers did a book called THE KING IN YELLOW which was an uncanny forecast of science fiction to come. And James Branch Cabell, with his own philosophic axe to grind, has created a very live world of fantasy in Poictesme, the scene of his cosmic spoofing of men and gods.

The mantles of the great fantasy writers therefore, seem to have fallen upon the shoulders of today's American and English science fiction authors. The bulk of this writing—and

(Continued on page 139)

KNOWLEDGE
THAT HAS
ENDURED WITH THE
PYRAMIDS

A SECRET METHOD FOR THE MASTERY OF LIFE

WHENCE came the knowledge that built the Pyramids and the mighty Temples of the Pharaohs? Civilization began in the Nile Valley centuries ago. Where did its first builders acquire their astounding wisdom that started man on his upward climb? Beginning with naught they overcame nature's forces and gave the world its first sciences and arts. Did their knowledge come from a race now submerged beneath the sea, or were they touched with Infinite inspiration? From what concealed source came the wisdom that produced such characters as Amenhotep IV, Leonardo da Vinci, Isaac Newton, and a host of others?

AMENHOTEP IV
Founder of Egypt's
Mystery Schools

Today it is known that they discovered and learned to interpret certain *Secret Methods* for the development of their inner power of mind. They learned to command the inner forces within their own beings, and to master life. This secret art of living has been preserved and handed down throughout the ages. Today it is extended to those who dare to use its profound principles to meet and solve the problems of life in these complex times.

This Sealed Book—FREE

Has life brought you that personal satisfaction, the sense of achievement and happiness that you desire? If not, it is your duty to yourself to learn about this rational method of applying natural laws for the mastery of life. To the thoughtful person it is obvious that everyone cannot be entrusted with an intimate knowledge of the mysteries of life, for everyone is not capable of properly using it. But if you are one of those possessed of a true desire to forge ahead and wish to make use of the subtle influences of life, the Rosicrucians (not a religious organization) will send you A Sealed Book of explanation without obligation. This Sealed Book tells how you, in the privacy of your own home, without interference with your personal affairs or manner of living, may receive these secret teachings. Not weird or strange practices, but a rational application of the basic laws of life. Use the coupon, and obtain your complimentary copy.

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San Jose, California

Please send free copy of Sealed Book which I shall read as directed.

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The ROSICRUCIANS
SAN JOSE (AMORC) CALIFORNIA

BILL STOPPED THE WILD BOAR'S CHARGE AND THEN...

WILD TURKEY HUNTING IN A SOUTHERN NATIONAL FOREST CAN HARDLY BE CLASSED AS A DANGEROUS SPORT, BUT WHEN A WOUNDED WILD BOAR INTRUDES...

WHEN WE BORROWED JEB'S CAR, WE SHOULDA TAKEN HIS TRAILER, TOO
WHY THAT'S JEB SCOTT'S CAR! THEN YOU MUST BE HIS HOUSE GUEST!
THAT'S ME, ALL RIGHT!

WELL, JUNE, IT SOUNDS LIKE YOU TWO COULDN'T WAIT TO MEET FORMALLY. I WAS GOING TO BRING BILL OVER THIS EVENING
UNCLE JEB, YOU'RE A PEACH
SHE'S LOVELY

WHERE HAS THIS BLADE BEEN ALL MY LIFE! THAT'S THE SLICKEST SHAVE I'VE HAD IN YEARS!
THIN GILLETTES ARE MIGHTY POPULAR DOWN HERE. THEY'RE PLENTY KEEN

HE'S A FINE YOUNG MAN. EXCELLENT APPEARANCE AND VERY INTELLIGENT
I KNEW YOU'D LIKE HIM, COLONEL. I'VE APPROACHED HIM REGARDING A JUNIOR PARTNERSHIP

YOU ENJOY SWELL, EASY SHAVES... QUICK AND CLEAN... WITH THIN GILLETTES.
THEY ARE THE KEENEST BLADES IN THE LOW-PRICE FIELD AND FAR OUTLAST ALL OTHERS. MADE TO FIT YOUR GILLETTE RAZOR PRECISELY, THIN GILLETTES CANNOT SCRAPE OR IRRITATE YOUR FACE. ASK FOR THIN GILLETTES IN THE CONVENIENT 10-BLADE PACKAGE
THIN Gillette 10 BLADES
10-25¢
4-10¢
TEN-BLADE PACKAGE HAS COMPARTMENT FOR USED BLADES

The Story Behind

DAWN OF FLAME

and

THE BLACK FLAME

S. G. WEINBAUM

BROUGHT together here as they belong are the two long related stories frequently considered Stanley G. Weinbaum's best works. Though THE BLACK FLAME was written first and was followed about six months later by DAWN OF FLAME, in the actual chronology of fictional events DAWN comes first. We have therefore set them up so, in order that you may read the full story in its proper order and sequence.

A premature death cut short Stanley Weinbaum's career just as it was flowering into maturity. He was a man of colossal mental activity, constantly bubbling with ideas to which he gave the fresh and original twists which are the product of a highly sophisticated mind. His admirers are vociferously loyal and possess tenacious memories, so that sixteen years after his death the requests for his stories are as unremitting as ever.

Most of his fans feel exactly as did the one who wrote us recently to say that had Weinbaum lived, his genius would have far outclassed that of any science-fiction writer living today.

There is no doubt that Weinbaum's stories abound with flashes of genius. Moreover, his versatility was amazing. THE BRINK OF INFINITY was a story dealing with pure mathematics—and which managed to make that dry science fascinating—while the FLAME stories are high romantic adventure. Yet in spite of the diametrically opposed themes, both become completely absorbing under the magic of Stanley G. Weinbaum's touch.

It is something of a public service, therefore, to respond to so many thousands of requests and bring you the two FLAME stories. To us it is something of a gesture toward remembering a brilliant youth whose death was a loss and who deserves to be remembered. If you have read Weinbaum before, you will treasure these stories. If he is new to you, after reading them you may better understand the fierce loyalty which surrounds his memory.

To few people is given the ability of foreseeing the eventual value of things in their own time, so that many of the early classics now out of print, have become scarce or unavailable altogether. Thousands of new readers who are discovering science fiction every year have never read Weinbaum and might never have the opportunity of doing so were the stories not brought to light again.

And if there is someone you know who has expressed curiosity about science fiction and you have been wondering what to give him to start, you could do worse than to start him right here!

—*The Editor*

Stanley G. Weinbaum's Twin Masterpieces of Science Fiction

DAWN of FLAME

A Novelet by STANLEY G. WEINBAUM

Lovely but cruel, young but immortal; the Black Princess

rode into Ormiston . . . death like a gift in her hand!

I

HULL TARVISH looked backward for the last time at the little mountainside cottage that had been his home. Then he faced about, purposefully, and strode away—out of Ozarky.

He passed the place where the great steel road of the Ancients had been, now only two rusty streaks and a row of decayed logs. Beside it was the mossy heap of stones that had been an ancient structure in the days before the Dark Centuries, three hundred years ago, when Ozarky had been a part of the old state of M'souri.

They had been mighty sorcerers, those ancients; their steel roads went everywhere, and everywhere were the ruins of their towns, built it was said, by a magic that lifted weights. Down in the valley, he knew, men were still seeking that magic.

Tarvish whistled to himself, shifted the rag bag on his shoulder, set his bow more comfortably on his mighty back, and trudged on. He was going to see what the world was like. He had been always a restless sort, not at all like the other six Tarvish sons. They were true mountainies. Not Hull, however; he was restless, curious, dreamy. So he whistled his way into the world, and was happy.

At evening he stopped at the Hobel cottage on the edge of the mountains. Away before him stretched the plain, and in the darkening distance was visible the church spire of Norse. That was a village; Hull had never seen a village. But he had heard all about Norse, because the mountainies occasionally went down there to buy powder and ball for their rifles, those of them who had rifles.

Hull had only a bow. Powder and ball cost money; but an arrow did the same work for nothing, and that without scaring all the game a mile away.

Morning he bade good-by to the Hobels, and set off. His powerful, brown bare legs flashed under his ragged trou-

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sers, his bare feet made a pleasant *soosh* in the dust of the road, the June sun beat warm on his right cheek. He was happy; he was bound for adventure.

He swung placidly on toward Norse with a glistening spring-steel bow on his shoulder, and twenty-two bright tubular steel arrows in his quiver.

He stopped on a little rise and the town lay before him. He stared. A hundred houses at least. More than he'd ever seen in his life all together. He stared at the houses, and at the people, most of them shod in leather.

Hull didn't care for Norse, he decided. As the sun set, the houses loomed too close, as if they'd stifle him, so he set out into the countryside. There he found a good place and slept.

HE AWOKE dewy wet. The sun shot golden lances through the trees, and he was ravenously hungry. He ate the last of his mother's brown bread from his bag, then strode out to the road. There was a wagon creaking there plodding northward. The bearded, kindly man in it was glad enough to have him ride for company.

"Mountainy?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Bound where?"

"The world," said Hull.

"Well," observed the other, "it's a big place, and all I've seen of it is much like this. All except Selui.* That's a city. Twenty thousand people in it! Maybe more. And they got ruins there the biggest you ever saw. Bridges. Buildings."

"Who lived in them?" asked Hull.

"Don't know. Who'd want to live so high up it'd taken a full morning to climb there? Unless it was magic. I don't hold much with magic but they do say the Old People knew how to fly."

"I don't believe it," Hull said.

"Nor I. But did you hear what they're saying in Norse?"

"I didn't hear anything."

"They say," said the farmer, "that Joaquin Smith is going to march again."

"Joaquin Smith!"

"Yes. Even the mountainies know about him, eh?"

"Who doesn't?" returned Hull. "Then there'll be fighting in the south, I guess. I have a notion to go south."

"Why?"

"I like fighting," said Hull simply.

"Fair answer," said the farmer, "but from what folks say, there's not much fighting when the Master marches. He has a spell; there's great sorcery in N'Orleans, from the merest warlock up to Martin Sair."

"I'd like to see his sorcery against arrow and ball," said Hull grimly. There's none of us can't spot either eye at a thousand paces, using a rifle. Or two hundred with arrow."

"No doubt, but what if powder flames, and your guns fire themselves before he's even across the horizon? They say he has a spell for that, he or Black Margot."*

"Black Margot?"

"The Princess, his half-sister. The dark witch who rides beside him, the Princess Margaret."

"I don't know," said the other. "It makes small difference to me whether I pay my taxes to N'Orleans or to gruff Marcus Ormiston, who's eldarch of Ormiston† village there."

---

*Selui: The ancient St. Louis

*It is a usual error of historians of the Conquest to speak of the Princess Margaret as either Margaret of Urbs or the Black Flame. Both terms are anachronisms. She was not known as the Black Flame until the time of the poet Sovern, as yet unborn, while of course Urbs, the vast, glittering, brilliant, wicked world metropolis and capital, was at this time only a dream in the mind of Joaquin Smith.

†Ormiston: The present village of Ormon.

"The mountainies pay taxes to no one." Hull was silent a moment. Then he burst out. "The Master, is he really immortal?"

The other shrugged. "How can I say? There are great sorcerers in the southlands, the greatest of whom is Martin Sair. But I do know this, that

THE PRINCESS

I have seen sixty-two years, and as far back as memory goes there was always Joaquin Smith in the south, and always an Empire gobbling cities as a hare gobbles carrots. When I was young it was far away, now it reaches close at hand; that is all the difference. Men talked of the Satanic beauty of Black Margot then as they do now, and of the wizardry of Martin Sair."

Hull made no answer, for Ormiston was at hand. The village was much like Norse save that it huddled among low hills, on the crest of some of which loomed ancient ruins. At the near side his companion halted, and Hull thanked him as he leaped to the ground.

He spun suddenly about as a voice called him from across the road: "Hi! Mountainy!" It was a girl. A pretty girl, slim-waisted, copper-haired, blue-eyed.

The voice of the farmer sounded behind him. "It's Vail Ormiston, the eldarch's daughter."

But Vail Ormiston was above much converse with a wandering mountainman. She surveyed his mighty form approvingly and then disappeared into the house.

But that afternoon, trudging toward Selui, he was richer than when he had set out by the memory of the copper hair and blue eyes of Vail Ormiston.

II

THREE weeks in Selui had served to give Hull Tarvish an acquaintance with the place. He no longer gaped at the sky-piercing ruins of the ancient city, or the vast fallen bridges, and he was quite at home in the town that lay beside it. He had found work easily enough in a baker's establishment, where his great muscles served well. The hours were long, but his pay was munificent—five silver quarters a week.

Ordinarily Hull was quick to make friends, but his long hours hindered him. He had but one; an enormously old man who sat at evening on the step beyond his lodging, Old Einar.

"I wonder," he said to Old Einar, staring at the crumbling towers of the Ancients glowing in the sunset, "what the Ancients were like. Were they men like us? Then how could they fly?"

"They were men like us, Hull. As for flying—well, it's my belief that flying is a legend. There was a man supposed

to have flown over the cold lands to the north and those to the south, and also across the great sea.

"But this flying man is called in some accounts Bird and in others Lindbird, and surely one can see the origin of such a legend. The migrations of birds, who cross land and seas each year, that is all."

"Or perhaps magic," suggested Hull.

"There *is* no magic. The Ancients themselves denied it, and I have struggled through many a moldy book in their curious, archaic tongue!"

"You can read!" Hull exclaimed. "That in itself is a sort of magic."

Old Einar settled himself on the step and puffed blue smoke from his pipe. "Shall I tell you the true story of the world, Hull—the story called History?"

"Yes. In the Ozarky we spoke little of such things."

"Well," said the old man comfortably. "I will begin, then, at what to us is the beginning, but to the Ancients was the end. Great steel wagons once roared over the iron roads of the Ancients. Men crossed the oceans to east and west. The cities were full of whirring wheels, and instead of the many little city-states of our time, there were giant nations with thousands of cities and a hundred million—a hundred and fifty million people."

Hull stared. "I do not believe there are so many people in the world," he said.

Old Einar shrugged. "Who knows?" he returned. "The ancient books—all too few—tell us that the world is round, and that beyond the seas lie one, or several other continents, but what races are there today not even Joaquin Smith can say."

He puffed smoke again. "Well, such was the ancient world. These were warlike nations, so fond of battle that they had to write many books about the horrors of war to keep themselves at peace, but they always failed. During the time they called their twentieth century there was a whole series of wars, not such little quarrels as we have so often between our city-states, nor even such as that between the Memphis League and the Empire, five years ago. Their wars spread like storm clouds around the world, and were fought between millions of men with unimaginable weapons that flung destruction a hundred miles and with ships on the seas, and with poisonous gases."

"I love fighting," said Hull.

"Yes, but would you love it if it meant simply destroying of thousands of men beyond the horizon? Men you were never to see?"

"No. War should be man to man, or at least no farther than the carry of a rifle ball."

"True. Well some time near the end of their twentieth century, the ancient world exploded into war like a powder horn in a fire. It was not only nation against nation, but race against race. And then came the Gray Death."

HULL shuddered. "I have heard of the Gray Death," he said.

"At any rate," Einar went on, "the Gray Death leaped suddenly across the world, striking alike at all people; six out of every ten died.

"By the first century after the Plague, there was little left of the Ancients save their ruined cities where lurked robber bands that scoured the country by night. They had little interest in anything save food or the coined money of the old nations, and they did incalculable damage. None or few could read, and on cold nights it was usual to raid the ancient libraries for books to burn, and to make things worse, fire gutted the ruins of all cities, and there was no organized resistance to it. The flames simply burned themselves out, and priceless books, vanished."

"Yet in N'Orleans they study, don't they?" asked Hull.

"Yes. I'm coming to that. About two centuries after the Plague—a hundred years ago, that is—the world had

stabilized itself. And then, into the town of N'Orleans, built beside the ancient city, came young John Holland.

"Holland was a rare specimen, anxious for learning. He found the remains of an ancient library and began slowly to decipher the archaic words in the few books that had survived. Little by little others joined him, and the Academy was born.

"It was a group of studious men living a sort of communistic, monastic life. One day a youth named Teran had a dream—no less a dream than to recondition the centuries-old power machines of N'Orleans, to give the city the power that travels on wires!"

"What's that?" asked Hull. "What's that, old Einar?"

"You wouldn't understand, Hull. It didn't stop Teran to realize that there was no coal or oil to run his machines. He believed that when power was needed, it would be there so he and his followers scrubbed and filed and welded away, and Teran was right. When he needed power, it was there.

"This was the gift of a man named Olin, who had unearthed the last, the crowning secret of the Ancients, the power called atomic energy. He gave it to Teran, and N'Orleans became a miracle city where lights glowed and wheels turned. Men came from every part of the continent to see, and among these were two called Martin Sair and Joaquin Smith, come out of Mexico with the half-sister of Joaquin, the Satanically beautiful being sometimes called Black Margot.

"Martin Sair was a genius. He found his field in the study of medicine, and it was less than ten years before he had uncovered the secret of the hard rays. He was studying sterility, but he found —immortality!"

"Then the Immortals are immortal!" murmured Hull.

"It may be, Hull. At least they do not seem to age, but . . . Well, Joaquin Smith was also a genius, but of a different sort. I think he dreams of an American Empire, or—" old Einar's voice dropped— "A world Empire. At least, he took Martin Sair's immortality and traded it for power.

"The Second Enlightenment was dawning and there was genius in N'Orleans. He traded immortality to Kohlmar for a weapon, he offered it to Olin for atomic power, but Olin was already past youth, and refused. So the Master seized the secret of the atom despite Olin, and the Conquest began.

"Smith raised his army and marched north, and everywhere cities fell or yielded willingly. Joaquin Smith is magnificent, and men flock to him, cities cheer him. Only here and there men hate him bitterly, and speak such words as tyrant, and talk of freedom."

"What are they like, the Immortals?"

"Well, Martin Sair is as cold as mountain rock, and the Princess Margaret is like black fire. Even my old bones feel younger only to look at her, and it is wise for young men not to look at her at all, because she is quite heartless, ruthless, and pitiless. As for Joaquin Smith, the Master—I do not know the words to describe so complex a character, and I know him well. He is mild, perhaps, but enormously strong, kind or cruel as suits his purpose, glitteringly intelligent, and dangerously charming."

"You *know* him!" echoed Hull, and added curiously. "What is your other name, Old Einar, you who know the Immortals?"

The old man smiled.

"When I was born," he said, "my parents called me Einar *Olin*."

III

JOAQUIN Smith was marching. Hull Tarvish leaned against the door of File Ormson's iron worker's shop in Ormiston, and stared at the blue mountains of Ozarky in the south. Report had it Ozarky was already under the Master's sway. As for Selui, the Master, encamped above Norse, had requested the

city's surrender.

Selui wasn't going to yield. Already the towns of the three months' old Selui Confederation were sending in their men, from Bloomington, from Cairo, even from distant Chicago on the shores of the saltless sea Mitchin.

Hull knew there was fighting ahead, and he had come to take part in it.

Ormiston was his home for the present, since he'd found work here with File Ormson, the squat iron-worker, broad-shouldered as Hull himself and a head shorter.

A voice sounded at his side. "Hull Tarvish! Are you too proud to notice humble folk?"

It was Vail Ormiston. He remembered pleasantly an evening two days ago when he had sat and talked with her on a bench by a tree.

And he remembered the walk through the fields when she had shown him the mouth of the great ancient storm sewer that had run under the dead city, and still stretched crumbling for miles underground toward the hills.

And then he recalled her story of how, when a child, she had lost herself in it, so that her father had planted the tangle of blackberry bushes that still concealed the opening.

He grinned, "Is it the eldarch's daughter speaking of humble folk? Your father will be taxing me double if he hears of this!"

Her eyes twinkled.

"I'd like to talk to you again this evening, Vail," he said boldly.

"Would you?" she murmured demurely.

"Yes, if Enoch Ormiston hasn't spoken first for your time."

"But he has, Hull."

He knew she was teasing him deliberately. "I'm sorry," he said shortly.

"But—I told him I was busy," she finished.

"Then what a misfortune it is that I have work to do," Hull said.

"What does File make?" asked Vail.

Instantly Hull's smile faded. "He forges—a sword!"

Vail, too, was no longer the joyous one of a moment ago. Over both of them had come the shadow of the Empire. Out in the blue hills of Ozarky Joaquin Smith was marching.

LATER that evening Hull watched the glint of a yellow moon on Vail's copper hair, and leaned back on the bench near her house at the edge of town. Behind them the stone house loomed dark, for her father was scurrying about in town on Confederation business, and the help had availed themselves of the evening of freedom to join the crowd in the village square. But the yellow daylight of the oil-lamp showed across the road in the house of Hue Helm, the former who had brought Hull from Norse to Ormiston.

It was at this light that Hull stared thoughtfully.

"I *like* fighting," he repeated, "but somehow the joy has gone out of this. It's as if one waited the onslaught of a thunder cloud."

"How," asked Vail in a timid, small voice, "can one fight magic?"

"There is no magic," said the youth, echoing Old Einar's words.

"Then why is it that Joaquin Smith has never lost a battle?"

"Knowledge," said Hull. "The knowledge of the Ancients."

"The knowledge of the Ancients was magic," said the girl. "If Holland, Olin, and Martin Sair are not sorcerers, then what are they? If Black Margot is no witch, then my eyes never looked on one."

"Have you seen them?" queried Hull.

"Of course, all but Holland, who is dead. Three years ago during the Peace of Memphis my father and I traveled into the Empire. I saw all of them about the city of N'Orleans."

"And is she—what they say she is?"

"The Princess?" Vail's eyes dropped. "Men say she is beautiful."

"But you think not?"

"What if she *is*?" snapped the girl

almost defiantly. "Her beauty is like her youth, like her very life—artificial, preserved after its allotted time, frozen. That's it—frozen by sorcery."

"At least," Hull returned, "there's no magic will stop a bullet save flesh and bone. Yes, and the wizard who stops one with his skull lies just as dead as an honest man."

"I hope you're right," she breathed timidly. "Hull, he must be stopped. He *must!* If Joaquin Smith takes Ormiston, my father is the one to suffer. His lands will be parceled out. He's old, Hull—old. What will become of him then? I know many people feel there is magic in the very name of Joaquin Smith, for he marches through armies that outnumber him ten to one." She paused. "But not Ormiston!" she cried fiercely. "Not if the women have to bear arms!"

"Not Ormiston," he agreed gently.

"You'll fight, Hull, won't you? Even though you're not Ormiston born?"

"Of course. I have bow and sword, and a good pistol. I'll fight."

"But no rifle? Wait, Hull."

In a moment she was back again. "Here. Here is a rifle and horn and ball. Send me a bullet through the Master's skull. And one besides between the eyes of Black Margot—for me!"

"I do not fight women," he said.

"Not woman but witch!"

"None the less, Vail, it must be two bullets for the Master and only the captive's chains for Princess Margaret."

"Yes!" she blazed. "Oh, yes, Hull, that's better. If I could ever hope to see that—" She rose suddenly and he followed her to the gate. "You must go," she murmured, "but before you leave me, you can—if you wish it, Hull—kiss me."

Of a sudden he was all shy mountainy again. He faced her flushing a furious red, but only half from embarrassment, for the rest was happiness. He circled her with his great arms and, very hastily, he touched his lips to soft ones.

"Now," he said exultantly, "now I will fight if I have to charge the men of the Empire by myself."

IV

THE MEN of the Confederation were pouring into Ormiston all night long. There was a rumble of wagons, bringing powder and ball from Selui, and food as well, for Ormiston couldn't even attempt to feed so many ravenous mouths. A magnificent army, ten thousand strong, and all of them seasoned fighting men.

The stand was to be at Ormiston, and Norse, the only settlement now between Joaquin Smith and the Confederation, was left to its fate. Experienced leaders had examined the territory, and had agreed on a plan. Three miles south of the town, the road followed an ancient railroad cut, with fifty-foot embankments on either side, heavily wooded for a mile north and south of the bridge across Eaglefoot Flow.

Along this course they were to distribute men, a single line where the bluffs were high and steep, massed forces where the terrain permitted. Joaquin Smith *must* follow that road; there was no other. An ideal situation for ambush, and a magnificently simple plan.

It was mid morning when the woods runners who had been sent into Ozarky returned with breath-taking news. Joaquin Smith had received the Selui defiance of his representations, and was marching, was close. His forces? The runners estimated them at four thousand men, all mounted with perhaps another thousand auxiliaries. The Master's army was outnumbered two to one!

The time was at hand. In the little room beside File Ormson's workshop, Hull was going over his weapons while Vail Ormiston, pale and nervous and very lovely, watched him.

"Before you go," Vail whispered, "will you—kiss me, Hull?"

He strode toward her, then recoiled

in sudden alarm. For he heard a series of the faintest possible clicks, and Hull fancied that he saw for an instant a glistening of tiny blue sparks on candlesticks and metal objects about the room, and that he felt for a brief moment a curious tingling.

Then he forgot all of these strange trifles as the powder horn on the table roared into terrific flame, and flaming wads of powder shot meteor-like around him.

For an instant he froze rigid. Vail was screaming—her dress was burning! He moved into sudden action, sweeping her from her feet, crashing her sideward to the floor, where his great hands beat out the fire. Then he slapped table and floor; and finally there were no flames.

He turned, coughing and choking in the black smoke, and bent over Vail, who gasped half overcome. Her skirt was burned to her knees.

"Are you hurt?" he cried. "Vail, are you burned?"

"No—no!" she panted.

"Then outside!" he snapped, reaching down to lift her.

Outside there was chaos. He set Vail gently on the step and surveyed a scene of turmoil. Men ran shouting, and from windows along the street black smoke poured. A dozen yards away a powder wagon had blasted itself into a vast mushroom of smoke, incinerating horses and driver alike.

"What—happened?" gasped Vail. "Hull, what—?"

He comprehended suddenly. "The sparkers*!" he roared. "Joaquin Smith's sparkers! Old Einar told me about them." He groaned. "There goes our ammunition."

He rushed toward the milling group that surrounded bearded old Marcus Ormiston and the Confederation leaders. He plowed his way fiercely through, and seized the panic-stricken graybeard.

He glared at the five leaders. "You'll carry through. Do you see? For powder and ball there's bow and sword. Gather your men and march!"

And such, within the hour, was the decision. Hull marched with the men of Ormiston. The Ormiston men were first on the line of Master's approach, and they filtered to their forest-hidden places as silently as foxes. Hull let his eyes wander back along the cut and what he saw pleased him, for no eye could have detected that along the deserted road lay ten thousand fighting men. They were good woodsmen, too, these fellows from the upper river and the saltless seas.

DOWN the way from Norse a single horseman came galloping. Old Marcus Ormiston recognized him, stood erect, and hailed him. They talked; Hull could hear the words. The Master had passed through Norse, pausing only long enough to notify the eldarch that henceforth his taxes must be transmitted to N'Orleans.

The informant rode on toward Ormiston, and the men fell to their quiet waiting. A half hour passed, and then, faint drifting on the silent air, came the sound of music. Singing; men's voices in song. Hull listened intently, and his skin crept and his hair prickled as he made out the words of the Battle Song of N'Orleans.

Hull gripped his bow and set feather to cord. He knew well enough that the plan was to permit the enemy to pass unmolested until their whole line was within the span of the ambush. And now, far down the way beyond the cut, he saw dust rising. Joaquin Smith was at hand.

Then—the unexpected! Suddenly through the trees to his right, brown-clothed, lithe little men were slipping like charging shadows, horns sounding, whistles shrilling. The woods runners of the Master! Joaquin Smith had anti-

*The Erden resonators. A device, now obsolete, that projected an inductive field sufficient to induce tiny electrical discharges in metal objects up to a distance of many miles. Thus it ignited inflammables such as gunpowder.

cipated just such an ambush!

Instantly Hull saw the weakness of his forces. They were ten thousand, true enough, but here they were strung thinly over a distance of two miles, and now the woods runners were at a vast advantage in numbers, with the main body approaching. One chance! Fight it out, drive off the scouts, and retire to the woods. While the army existed, even though Ormiston fell, there was hope.

He shouted, strung his arrow, and sent it flashing through the leaves. A bad place for arrows; their arching flight was always deflected by the tangled branches. He slung bow on shoulder and gripped his sword; close quarters was the solution!

Then—the second surprise! The woods runners had flashed their own weapons, little blunt revolvers.* But they sent no bullets; only pale beams darted through the leaves and branches, faint blue streaks of light. Sorcery?

Hull learned its meaning instantly. His sword grew suddenly scorching hot in his hands, and a moment later the queerest pain he had ever encountered racked his body. A violent, stinging, inward tingle that twitched his muscles and paralyzed his movements. A brief second and the shock ceased, but his sword lay smoking in the leaves, and his steel bow had seared his shoulders. Around him men were yelling in pain, writhing on the ground, running back into the forest depths.

Yet apparently no man had been killed. Hands were seared and blistered by weapons that grew hot under the blue beams, bodies were racked by the torture that Hull could not know was electric shock, but none was slain. Hope flared again, and he ran to head off a retreating group.

"To the road!" he roared. "Out where our arrows can fly free! Charge the column!"

For a moment the group halted. Hull seized a yet unheated sword from someone, and turned back.

Below in the cut was the head of the column, advancing placidly. He glimpsed a silver-helmeted, black-haired man on a great white mare at its head, and beside him a slighter figure on a black stallion. Joaquin Smith! Hull roared down the embankment toward him. Four men spurred instantly between him and the figure with the silver helmet. A beam flicked; his sword scorched his skin and he flung it away.

"Come on!" he bellowed. "Here's a fight!"

Strangely, in curious clarity, he saw the eyes of the Empire men, a smile in them, mysteriously amused. No anger, no fear—just amusement. Hull glanced quickly behind him, and knew finally the cause of that amusement. No one had followed him; he had charged the Master's army alone!

Deserted! Abandoned by those for whom he fought. He roared his rage to the echoing bluffs, and sprang at the horseman nearest him.

The horse reared, pawing the air, Hull thrust his mighty arms below its belly and heaved with a convulsion of his great muscles. Backward toppled steed and rider, and all about the Master was a milling turmoil where a man scrambled desperately to escape the clashing hoofs. But Hull glimpsed Joaquin Smith sitting statuelike and smiling on his great white mare.

He tore another rider from his saddle, and then, from the corner of his eye, he saw the slim youth at the Master's side raise a weapon, coolly, methodically. For the barest instant Hull faced icy green eyes where cold, passionless death threatened. He flung himself aside as a beam spat smoking against the dust of the road.

"Don't!" snapped Joaquin Smith, his low voice clear through the turmoil. "The youth is splendid!"

*Kohlmar's ionic beams. Two parallel beams of highly actinic light ionize a path of air, and along these conductive lanes of gas an electric current can be passed, powerful enough to kill or merely intense enough to punish.

But Hull had no mind to die uselessly. He bent, flung himself halfway up the bluff in a mighty leap, caught a dragging branch, and swung into the forest. A startled woods runner faced him; he flung the fellow behind him down the slope and slipped into the shelter of leaves.

"The wise warrior fights pride," he muttered to himself. "It's no disgrace for one man to run from an army."

V

HULL found File Ormson in the group that started across town to where the road from Norse elbowed east to enter. Hull had outsped the leisurely march of the Master, for there at the bend was the glittering army, now halted. Not even the woods runners had come into Ormiston town, for there they were too, lined in a brown-clad rank along the edge of the wood-lots beyond the nearer fields.

They had made no effort, apparently, to take prisoners, but had simply herded the terrified defenders into the village. Joaquin Smith had done it again; he had taken a town without a single death or at least with no casualties than whatever injuries had come from bursting rifles and blazing powder.

Suddenly Hull noticed something. "Where are the Confederation men?" he asked sharply.

File Ormson turned gloomy eyes on him. "They've fled." He scowled, then smiled. "You're a brave fool, Hull. Think not hard of us. Those fiendish ticklers tickled away our courage. But they can kill as well as tickle; when there was need of it before Memphis they killed quickly enough."

Down the way there was some sort of stir. Hull described the silver helmet of the Master. He dismounted and faced someone; it was—yes, old Marcus Ormiston. He left File Ormson and shouldered his way to the edge of the crowd that circled the two.

Joaquin Smith was speaking.

"And," he said, "all taxes are to be forwarded to N'Orleans, including those on your own lands. Half of them I shall use to maintain my government, but half will revert to your own district. You are no longer eldarch, but for the present you may collect the taxes at the rate I prescribe."

Old Marcus was bitterly afraid.

"My—my lands?" he whined.

Joaquin Smith turned away indifferently, placed foot to stirrup, and swung upon his great white mare.

Tall as Hull himself, more slender, but with powerful shoulders, he seemed no older than the late twenties, or no more than thirty at most, though that was only the magic of Martin Sair, for more than eighty years had passed since his birth in the mountains of Mexico. His bronzed body was like the ancient statues Hull had seen in Selui, and he looked hardly the fiend that most people thought him.

He rose forward, and a dozen officers followed.

A voice, a tense, shrieking voice sounded behind Hull.

"You! It is Hull! It's you!" It was Vail, teary-eyed and pale. "They said you were—" She broke off sobbing, clinging to him, while Enoch Ormiston watched sourly.

He held her. "It isn't as bad as it might be," he consoled. "He wasn't as severe as I feared."

"Severe!" she echoed. "Do you believe those mild words of his, Hull? First our taxes, then our lands, and next it will be our lives—or at least my father's life. Don't you understand? That was no eldarch from some enemy town, Hull. That was Joaquin Smith. Joaquin Smith! He and Black Margot and their craft! *Look there!*

He spun around. For a moment he saw nothing save the green-eyed youth who had turned death-laden eyes on him at Eaglefoot Flow mounted on the mighty black stallion. Youth? He saw suddenly that it was a woman—a girl, rather. Eighteen — twenty-five? He

couldn't tell. The sunset fell on a flaming black mop of hair, so black that it glinted blue—an intense, unbelievable black.

Like Joaquin Smith she wore only a shirt and very abbreviated shorts. There was a curious grace in even the way she sat the idling steed, one hand on its haunches, the other on withers, the bridle dangling loose.

"Black Margot!" Hull whispered. "Brazen! Half naked! What's so beautiful about *her*?"

AS IF she heard his whisper, she turned suddenly, her emerald eyes sweeping the crowd about him, and he felt his question answered. Her beauty was starkly incredible—audacious, outrageous.

Those eyes met Hull's, and it was almost as if he heard an audible click. He saw recognition in her face, and she passed her glance casually over his mighty figure. If she acknowledged his gaze at all, it was by the faintest of all possible smiles of mockery as she rode coolly away from Joaquin Smith.

"She she smiled at you, Hull!" gasped Vail. "I'm frightened."

His fascination was yielding now to a surge of hatred for Joaquin Smith, for the Princess, for the whole Empire. It was Vail he loved, and she was being crushed by these. An idea formed slowly as he stared down the street where Joaquin Smith had dismounted and was now striding into the little church. He heard an approving murmur sweep the crowd. That was simply policy, the Master's worshipping in Ormiston church, a gesture to the crowd.

He lifted the steel bow from his back and bent it. The spring was still in it. "Wait here!" he snapped to Vail, and strode up the street toward the church.

Outside stood a dozen Empire men, and the Princess idled on her great black horse. He slipped across the churchyard, around behind where a tangle of vines stretched toward the roof. He pulled himself hand over hand to the eaves, and thence to the peak.

He crept forward to the base of the steeple. Now he must leave the peak and creep precariously along the steep slope around it. He reached the street edge and peered cautiously over.

The Master was still within. Against his will he glanced at Black Margot, and even put cord to feather and sighted at her ivory throat. He could not loose the shaft.

Below him there was a stir. Joaquin Smith came out and swung to his white horse. Now was the moment. Hull rose to his knees, hoping that he could remain steady on the sharp pitch of the roof. Carefully, carefully, he drew the steel arrow back.

There was a shout. He had been seen, and a blue beam sent racking pain through his body. For an instant he bore it, then lossed his arrow and went sliding down the roof edge and over.

He fell on soft loam. A dozen hands seized him, dragged him upright, thrust him out into the street. He saw Joaquin Smith still on his horse, but the glistening arrow stood upright like a plume in his silver helmet, and a trickle of blood was red on his cheek.

But he wasn't killed. He raised the helmet from his head, waved aside the cluster of officers, and with his own hands bound a white cloth about his forehead. Then he turned cool gray eyes on Hull.

"You drive a strong shaft," he said, and then recognition flickered in his eyes. "I spared your life some hours ago, did I not?"

Hull said nothing.

The conqueror turned away. "Look him up," he ordered coolly. "Let him make whatever preparations his religion requires, and then—execute him."

Above the murmur of the crowd Hull heard Vail Ormiston's cry of anguish. He turned to smile at her.

"I'm sorry," he called gently. "I loved you, Vail." Then he was being thrust away down the street.

He was pushed into Hue Helm's stone-

walled tool shed. Hull drew himself up and stood passively by the door, before which stood two grim Empire men.

One of them spoke. "Keep peaceful, Weed,"* he said in his N'Orleans drawl. "Go ahead with your praying."

"I do nothing," said Hull. "The mountainies believe that a right life is better than a right ending, and right or wrong a ghost's but a ghost anyway."

The guard laughed. "And a ghost you'll be."

"If a ghost I'll be," retorted Hull, turning slowly toward him, "I'd sooner turn one—fighting!"

He sprang suddenly, crashed a mighty fist against the arm that bore the weapon, thrust one guard upon the other, and overleaped the tangle into the dusk. As he spun to circle the house, something very hard smashed viciously against the back of his skull.

VI

FOR a brief moment Hull sprawled half stunned, then his muscles lost their paralysis and he thrust himself to his feet, whirling to face whatever assault threatened. In the doorway the guards still scrambled, but directly before him towered a rider on a black mount, and two men on foot flanked him. The rider, of course, was the Princess, her green eyes luminous in the dusk as she slapped a short sword into its scabbard. It was a blow from the flat of its blade that had felled him.

She held now the blunt weapon of the blue beam. "Stand quiet, Hull Tarvish," she said. "One flash will burst that stubborn heart of yours forever."

Perforce he stood quiet, his back to the wall of the shed.

She spoke again, letting her glance flicker disdainfully over the two appalled guards. "The Master will be pleased," she said contemptuously, "to learn that one unarmed Weed outmatches two men of his own cohort."

"But your Highness," the nearer man faltered, "he rushed us unexpect—"

"No matter," she cut in, and turned back to Hull. For the first time now he really felt the presence of death as she said coolly, "I am minded to kill you."

"Then do it!" he snapped.

"But I think also," she resumed, "that your living might amuse me more than your death, and—" for the first time there was a breath of feeling in her voice—"God knows I need amusement!" Her tones chilled again. "I give you your life."

"Your Highness," muttered the cowed guard, "the Master has ordered—"

"I countermand the orders" she said shortly, and then to Hull, "You are a fighter. Are you also a man of honor?"

"If I'm not," he retorted, "the lie that says I am would mean nothing to me."

She smiled coldly.

"Well, I think you are, Hull Tarvish. You go free on your word to carry no weapons, and your promise to visit me this evening in my quarters at the eldarch's home." She paused. "Well?"

"I give my word."

"And I take it. Away, all of you!" she ordered. She rode off toward the street.

Hull let himself relax against the wall with a low *"whew"* Sweat started on his cold forehead, and his mighty muscles felt weak.

He wanted to find Vail, to use her cool loveliness as an antidote for the dark poison of the beauty he had been facing. And then, at the gate, he drew back suddenly. A group of men in Empire garb came striding by, and among them, helmetless and with his head bound, moved the Master.

His eyes fell on Hull.

"You again!" he said. "How is it that you still live, Hull Tarvish?"

"The Princess ordered it."

The frown faded. "So," said Joaquin Smith slowly, "Margaret takes it upon herself to interfere somewhat too fre-

*Weed: The term applied by Dominists (the Master's partisans) to their opposers. It originated in Joaquin Smith's remark before the Battle of Memphis: "Even the weeds of the fields have taken arms against us."

quently. I suppose she also freed you?"

"Yes, on my promise not to bear arms."

There was a curious expression in the face of the conqueror.

"Well," he said almost gently, "it was not my intention to torture you, but merely to have you killed for your treason. It may be that you will soon wish that my orders had been left unaltered." He strode on into the eldarch's dooryard.

HULL hurried toward his room beside File Ormson's shop, and there, tragic-eyed and mist-pale, he found Vail Ormiston. She was huddled on the doorstep with Enoch holding her against him.

Vail looked up with uncomprehending eyes, stared for a moment without expression, and, then, with a little moan, crumpled and fainted.

She was unconscious only a few moments, scarcely long enough for Hull to bear her into his room. There she lay now on his couch, clinging to his great hand, convinced at least of his living presence.

"I think," she murmured, "that you're as deathless as Joaquin Smith, Hull. Tell me—tell me how it happened."

He told her. "Black Margot's to thank for it," he finished.

Enoch cut in. "Here's one for the Harriers, then" he said sourly. "The pack needs him."

"The Harriers?" Hull looked up puzzled.

"Oh, Hull, yes!" said Vail. "File Ormson's been busy. The Harriers are what's left of the army—the better citizens of Ormiston. The Master's magic didn't reach beyond the ridge, and over the hills there's still powder and rifles. And the spell is no longer in the valley, either. One of the men carried a cup of powder across the ridge, and it didn't burn."

The better citizens, Hull thought smiling. She meant of course those who owned land and feared a loss of it such as Marcus Ormiston had suffered. But aloud he said only, "How many men have you?"

"Oh, there'll be several hundred with the farmers across the hills." She looked into his eyes. "I know it's a forlorn hope, Hull, but—we've got to try. You'll help, won't you?"

"Of course. But all your Harriers can attempt is raids. They can't fight the Master's army."

"I know. I know it, Hull. It's a desperate hope."

"Desperate?" said Enoch suddenly. "Hull, didn't you say you were ordered to Black Margot's quarters this evening?"

"Yes."

"Then—see here! You'll carry a knife in your arm-pit. Sooner or later she'll want you alone with her, and when *that* happens, you'll slide the knife quietly into her ruthless heart! If you've courage!"

"Courage!" he growled. "To murder a woman!"

"Black Margot's a devil!"

Hull scowled. "I swore not to bear weapons."

"Swore to *her!*" snapped Enoch. "That needn't bind you."

"My word's given," said Hull firmly. "I do not lie."

Vail smiled. "You're right," she whispered, and as Enoch's face darkened, "I love you for it, Hull."

"Then," grunted Enoch, "if it's not lack of courage, do this. Lure her somehow across the west windows. We can slip two or three Harriers to the edge of the woodlot, and if she passes a window with the light behind her—well, they won't miss."

Vail's blue eyes pleaded. "That won't be breaking your word, Hull. Please. She's a sorceress. Please, Hull."

Bitterly he yielded. "I'll try, then." He frowned gloomily. "She saved my life, and— Well, which room is hers?"

"My father's. Mine is the western chamber, which she took for her—her maid. We," she said, "are left to sleep

in the kitchen."

An hour later, having eaten, he walked somberly home with Vail. The guards let Vail in, but halted Hull. One of them ran exploratory hands about his body.

"Orders of Her Highness," he explained gruffly.

Hull smiled. The Princess had not trusted his word too implicitly. In a moment the fellow had finished his search and swung the door open.

Hull entered. He had never seen the interior of the house, and for a moment its splendor dazzled him. Carved ancient furniture, woven carpets, intricately worked standards for the oil lamps, and even a full-length mirror of ancient workmanship wherein his own image faced him.

Upstairs was a dimly lit hall where a guard stood silently. "The Princess Margaret?" he asked, but in place of answer came the liquid tones of Margaret herself. "Let him come in, Corlin."

A screen within the door blocked sight of the room. Hull circled it, steeling himself against the memory of that soul-burning loveliness he remembered. But his defense was shattered by the shock that awaited him.

The screen, indeed, shielded the Princess from the sight of the guard in the hall, but not from Hull's eyes. He stared appalled at the sight of her lying in indifference in a great tub of water, being bathed by one of her women. He could not avoid a single glimpse of her exquisite form.

"Oh, sit down!" she said contemptuously. "This will be over in a moment."

He kept his eyes averted while water splashed and a towel whisked sibilantly. When he heard her footsteps beside him he glanced up tentatively, still fearful of what he might see, but she was covered now in a full robe of filmy black and gold that made her seem taller.

Hull felt again the fascination against which he had steeled himself.

"So," she said. "You may sit down again. I do not demand court etiquette in the field." She sat opposite, and produced a black cigarette, lighting it at the chimney of the lamp on the table.

"Now," she said with a faintly ironic smile, "tell me what they say of me here."

"They call you witch."

"And do they hate me?"

"Hate you?" he echoed thoughtfully. "At least they will fight you and the Master to the last feather on the last arrow."

"Of course. The young men will fight —except those that Joaquin has bought with the eldarch's lands—because they know that once within the Empire, fighting is no more to be had. No more joyous, thrilling little wars between the cities, no more boasting, and parading before the pretty provincial girls." She paused. "And you, Hull Tarvish—what do you think of me?"

"I call you witch for other reasons."

The Princess looked narrowly at him. "Tell me," she said, "was that the eldarch's pretty daughter who cried so piteously after you there before the church?"

"Yes."

"And do you love her?"

"Yes." This was the opening he had sought. He took the opportunity grimly. "I should like to ask one favor."

"Ask it."

"I should like to see the chamber that was to have been our bridal room. The west chamber."

The Princess laughed disdainfully. "Go see it then."

For a moment he feared, or hoped, perhaps, that she was going to let him go alone. Then she rose and followed him to the hall, and to the door of the west chamber.

VII

HULL paused at the door of the west chamber to permit the Princess to enter. Her glorious green eyes flashed speculatively to his face, then she

stepped back.

"You first, Weed," she commanded.

He did not hesitate. He turned and strode into the room, hoping that the Harrier riflemen, if indeed they lurked in the copse, might recognize his mighty figure in time to stay their eager triggers. His scalp prickled as he moved steadily across the window, but nothing happened.

Behind him the Princess laughed softly. "I have lived too long in the aura of plot and counterplot in N'Orleans," she said. "I mistrust you without cause, honest Hull Tarvish."

Her words tortured him. He turned to see her black robe mold itself to her body as she moved, and, as sometimes happens in moments of stress, he caught an instantaneous picture of her with his sense so quickened that it seemed as if she, himself, and the world were frozen into immobility.

He remembered her forever as she was then, with her limbs in the act of striding, her green eyes soft in the lamplight. Witch and devil she might be, but she looked like a dark-haired angel, and in that moment his spirit revolted.

"No!" he bellowed, and sprang toward her, striking her slim shoulders with both hands in a thrust that sent her staggering back into the hallway, there to sit hard and suddenly on the floor beside the amazed guard.

She sprang up instantly, and there was nothing angelic now in her face. "You—hurt—me!" she hissed. "Me! Now I'll—" She snatched the guard's weapon from his belt, thrust it full at Hull's chest, and sent the blue beam humming upon him.

It was pain far worse than that at Eaglefoot Flow. He bore it stolidly, grinding into silence the groan that rose in his throat.

"Treachery again!" she said. "I won't kill you, Hull Tarvish. I know a better way." She whirled toward the stairwell. "Lebeau!" she called. "Lebeau! There's—" She glanced sharply at Hull, and continued, "Il ya des tirailleurs dans le bois. Je vais les tirer en avant!*"

It was the French of N'Orleans, as incomprehensible to Hull as Aramaic.

"I've a mind," she blazed, "to strip the Weed clothes from the Eldarch's daughter and send her marching across the window!"

He was utterly appalled. "She—she—was in town!" he gasped, then fell silent at the sound of feet below.

"Well, there's no time," she retorted. "So, if I must—" She strode steadily into the west chamber, paused a moment, and then stepped deliberately in front of the window!

HULL was aghast. He watched her stand so that the lamplight must have cast her perfect silhouette full on the pane, stand tense and motionless for the fraction of a breath, and then leap back so sharply her robe billowed away from her body.

She had timed it to perfection. Two shots crashed almost together, and the glass shattered. And then, out in the night, a dozen beams criss-crossed, and, thin and clear in the silence after the shots, a yell of mortal anguish drifted up, and another, and a third.

The Princess Margaret smiled in malice, and sucked a crimson drop from a finger gashed by flying glass. "Your treachery reacts. Instead of my betrayal, you have befrayed your own men."

Hull Tarvish bit his lip.

"Well," she said musingly, "you're rather more entertaining than I had expected."

He chose to ignore the mockery in her voice. "Perhaps," he said grimly.

"Why, then, did you weaken, Hull Tarvish? You might have had my life."

"I do not fight women," he said despondently. "I looked at you—and turned weak." A question formed in his mind. "But why did you risk your life before the window? You could have

* "There are snipers in the copse. I'll draw them out!"

had fifty wood runners scour the copse."

She smiled, but there was a shrewd narrowness in her eyes. "Because so many of these villages are built above the underground ways of the Ancients —the subways, the sewers. How did I know that your assassin might slip into some burrow and escape? It was necessary to lure them into the disclosure."

Hull shadowed the gleam that shot into his own eyes. He remembered suddenly the ancient sewer in which the child Vail had wandered, whose mouth was hidden by blackberry bushes. So the Empire men were not aware of it!

"Your Highness," he said grimly, "unless you kill me now, I will be a bitter enemy to your Empire army."

"Perhaps less bitter than you think," she said softly. "See, Hull, the only three that know of your weakness are dead. No one can name you traitor or weakling."

"But *I* can," he returned somberly. "And you."

"Not I, Hull," she murmured. "I never blame a man who weakens because of me—and there have been many. Men as strong as you, Hull, and some that the world still calls great. Come in here," she said in altered tones. "Tell me, would you like to see the Great City, Hull?"

"You know I would."

She shrugged. "Oh, you can visit N'Orleans, of course, but suppose I offered you the chance to go as the—the *guest*, we'll say, of the Princess Margaret, what would you give for that privilege?"

"What would you ask for it?" he rejoined.

"Oh, your allegiance, perhaps. Or perhaps the betrayal of your little band of Harriers, who will be the devil's own nuisance to stamp out of these hills."

He looked up, startled that she knew the name. "The Harriers? How—"

She smiled. "We have friends among the Ormiston men. Friends bought with land," she added contemptuously. "But what of my offer, Hull?"

He scowled. "You say as your *guest*. What am I to understand by that?"

SHE LEANED across the table, her exquisite green eyes on his, her hair flaming blue-black, her perfect lips in a faint smile. "What you please, Hull. Whatever you please."

"Do you mean," he said huskily, "that you'd do that for so small a thing as the destruction of a little enemy band? You, with the whole Empire at your back?"

She nodded. "It saves trouble, doesn't it?"

"And honesty, virtue, honor, mean as little to you as that? Is this one of your usual means of conquest? Do you ordinarily sell your—your favors for—"

"Not ordinarily," she interrupted coolly. "First I must like my co-partner in the trade. You, Hull—I like those vast muscles of yours, and your stubborn courage, and your slow, clear mind. You are not a great man, Hull, for your mind has not the cold fire of genius, but you are a strong one, and I like you for it."

"Like me!" he roared, starting up in his chair. "Yet you think I'll trade what honor's left me for—that! You think I'll betray my cause! You're wrong!"

She shook her head, smiling. "No. I wasn't wrong, for I thought you wouldn't."

"Oh, you did!" he snarled. "Then what if I'd accepted? What would you have done then?"

"What I promised." She laughed at his angry, incredulous face. "Don't look so shocked, Hull. I'm not little Vail Ormiston. I'm the Princess Margaret of N'Orleans, called Margaret the Divine by those who love me, and by those who hate me called — well, *you* must know what my enemies call me."

"I do!" he blazed. "Black Margot! A good name for you!"

"Doubtless. But you fail to understand, Hull. I'm an Immortal. Would you have me follow the standards of death-bound Vail Ormiston?"

"Yes! By what right are you su-

perior to her standards?"

Her lips had ceased to smile, and her eyes turned wistful. "By the right that I can act in no other way, Hull," she said softly. A tinge of emotion quavered in her voice. "Immortality!" she whispered. "Year after year after year of sameness. I have no sense of destiny like Joaquin, who sees before him Empire."

His anger had drained away. He was staring at her aghast, appalled.

"When killing palls and love grows stale, what's left? Did I say love? How can there be love for me when I know that if I love a man, it will be only to watch him age and turn wrinkled, weak, and flabby? And when I beg Joaquin for immortality for the man I love he flaunts before me that promise of his to Martin Sair, to grant it only to those already proved worthy. By the time a man's worthy he's old."

She went on tensely. "I tell you, Hull, that I'm so friendless and alone that I envy you death-bound ones! Yes, and one of these days I'll join you!"

He gulped. "My God!" he muttered. "Better for you if you'd stayed in your native mountains with friends, home, husband and children."

"Children!" she echoed, her eyes misting with tears. "Immortals can't have children. Sometimes I curse Martin Sair and his hard rays. I don't want immortality; I want *life!*"

Hull found his mind in a whirl. He scarcely knew his own allegiance. "God!" he whispered. "I'm sorry!"

"And you, Hull—will you help me—a little?"

Suddenly some quirk of her dainty lips caught his attention. He stared incredulously into the green depths of her eyes. It was true. There was laughter there. She had been mocking him! And as she perceived his realization, her soft laughter rippled like rain or water.

"You—devil!" he choked. "You black witch! I wish I'd let you be killed!"

"Oh, no," she said demurely. "Look at me, Hull."

The command was needless. He watched her exquisite face.

"Do you love me, Hull?"

"I love Vail Ormiston," he rasped.

"But do you love *me?*"

He rose. "Whatever harm I can do your cause," he said, "that harm I will do. I will not be twice a traitor."

VIII

HULL looked down at noon over Ormiston valley, where Joaquin Smith was marching. At his side Vail Ormiston paused, and together they gazed silently over the Selui road, now black with riding men and rumbling wagons on their way to attack the remnant of the Confederation army in Selui. Three hundred soldiers and two hundred horsemen remained in Ormiston to deal with the Harriers, under Black Margot herself.

"Our moment comes tonight," Hull said soberly. "Our numbers all but equal theirs, and surprise is on our side."

Vail nodded. "The ancient tunnel was a bold thought, Hull. The Harriers are shoring up the crumbled places. Father is with them."

"He shouldn't be."

"But this is his hope, Hull. He lives for this."

"Small enough hope! Suppose we're successful, Vail. What will it mean save the return of Joaquin Smith and his army?"

"Oh, no!" cried Vail. "If our success means the end of Black Margot, isn't that enough? Besides, you know that half the Master's powers are the work of the witch. Enoch—poor Enoch—said so."

Hull winced. Enoch had been one of the three marksmen slain outside the west window.

"Enoch," she repeated softly. "He loved me in his sour way, Hull, but once I had known you, I had no thoughts for him."

Hull slipped his arm about her, cursing himself that he could not steal his

thought away from Margaret of N'Orleans, because it was Vail he loved, and Vail he wanted to love. But he could not blot Margaret's Satanic loveliness from his inward gaze.

"Well," he sighed, "let it be tonight, then. Was it four hours past sunset? Good. The Empire men should be sleeping or gaming in Tigh's Taven by that time. It's for us to pray for our gunpowder."

"Gunpowder? Oh, but didn't you hear what I told File Ormson and the Harriers. back there on the ridge? The casters of the spell are gone; Joaquin Smith has taken them to Selui. I watched and listened from the kitchen this morning."

"The sparkers? They're gone?"

"Yes. They called them reson—resators—"

"Resonators," said Hull, recalling Old Einar's words.

"Something like that. There were two of them, great iron barrels on swivels, and they swept the valley north and south, and east and west, and over toward Norse there was the sound of shots and the smoke of a burning building. They loaded them on wagons and dragged them away toward Selui."

"They didn't cross the ridge with their spell,"* said Hull. "The Harriers still have powder."

"Yes," murmured Vail, drawing his arm closer about her. "Tell me," she said suddenly, "what did she want of you last night?"

Hull hesitated for a moment. "Treason," he said finally. "She wanted me to betray the Harriers."

"What did she offer you for betrayal?"

Again he hesitated. "A great reward," he answered at last. "A reward out of all proportion to the task."

"But in what way? Men say so much of her beauty, of her deadly charm. Hull—did you feel it?"

"I love *you*, Vail."

She sighed, and drew yet closer. "I think you're the strongest man in the world, Hull. The very strongest."

"I'll need to be," he muttered, staring gloomily over the valley.

Vail left him in Ormiston village and took her way hesitantly homeward. Hull did what he could about the idle shop, and when the sun slanted low, bought himself a square loaf of brown bread, a great slice of cheese, and a bottle of wine. It was just as he finished his meal in his room that a pounding on the door of the shop summoned him.

It was an Empire man. "From Her Highness," he said, and handed him an intricately folded slip of black paper.

The mountain youth stared at it.

"This scratching means nothing to me," Hull said.

The Empire man sniffed contemptuously. "I'll read it," he said, taking the missive. "It says, 'Follow the messenger to our quarters,' and it's signed Margarita Imperii Regina, which means Margaret, Princess of the Empire."

"Suppose I won't go," growled Hull.

"This isn't an invitation, Weed. It's a command."

Hull grunted assent and followed the messenger.

THIS time, however, he found the Princess clothed, wearing the diminutive shorts and shirt that were her riding costume. She sat in a deep chair beside the table, a flagon of wine at hand and a black cigarette in her fingers. Her jet hair was like a helmet of ebony against the ivory of her forehead and throat, and her green eyes like twin emeralds.

"Sit down," she said, as he stood before her. Fire danced in her eyes. "Hull, I am as strong as most men, but I believe those vast muscles of yours could overpower me as if I were some shrinking provincial girl. And yet—"

"And yet what?"

"And yet you are much like my black

* The field of the Erden resonator passes readily through structures and walls, but is blocked by any considerable natural obstructions, hills, and for some reason, fogbanks or low clouds.

stallion Eblis. Your muscles are nearly as strong, but like him, I can goad you, drive you, lash you, and set you galloping in whatever direction I choose."

"Can you?" he snapped. "Don't try it." But the spell of her unearthly beauty was hard to face.

"But I think I shall try it," she said gently. "Hull, do you ever lie?"

"I do not."

"Shall I make you lie, then, Hull? Shall I make you swear such falsehoods that you will redden forever afterward at the thought of them?"

"You can't!"

"Do you love me?" Her face was saintlike, earnest, pure, even the green eyes were soft now as the green of spring.

"No!" he ground out savagely, then flushed crimson at the smile on her lips. "That isn't a lie!" he blazed. "*I* don't love your beauty; it's unnatural, hellish, and the gift of Martin Sair. It's a false beauty, like your whole life!"

"Suppose," she proceeded gently, "I were to promise to abandon Joaquin, to be no longer Black Margot and Princess of the Empire, but to be only—Hull Tarvish's wife. Between Vail and me, which of us would you choose?"

He said nothing for a moment. "You're unfair," he said bitterly at last. "Is it fair to compare Vail and yourself? She's sweet and loyal and innocent, but you—you're Black Margot!"

"Nevertheless," she said calmly, "I think I shall compare us. Sora!" A woman appeared. "Sora, this wine is gone. Send the eldarch's daughter here with another bottle and a second goblet."

Hull stared appalled. "What are you going to do?"

"No harm to your little Weed. I promise no harm."

"But—" He paused. Vail's footsteps sounded on the stair, and she entered timidly bearing a tray with a bottle and a metal goblet. He saw her start as she perceived him, but she only advanced quietly, set the tray on the table, and backed toward the door.

"Wait a moment," said the Princess. She rose and moved to Vail's side as if to force the comparison on Hull. Barefooted, the Princess Margaret was exactly the height of Vail in her low-heeled sandals, and she was the merest shade slimmer.

But her startling black hair and her glorious green eyes seemed almost to fade the unhappy Ormiston girl's to a colorless dun. It wasn't fair. Hull realized that it was like comparing candlelight to sunbeam.

"Hull," said the Princess, "which of us do you love?"

He saw Vail's lips twitch fearfully, and he remained stubbornly silent.

"I take it," said the Princess, smiling, "that your silence means you love me the more. Am I right?"

He was in utter torment. His white lips twisted in anguish as he muttered finally, "Oh, God! Then yes!"

She smiled softly. "You may go," she said to the pallid and frightened Vail.

But for a moment the girl hesitated. "Hull," she whispered, "Hull, I know you said that to save me. I don't believe it, Hull, and I love you. I blame— her!"

"Why do you delight in torture?" cried Hull after Vail had left. "You're cruel as a cat."

"That wasn't cruelty," said the Princess gently. "It was but a means of proving what I said, that your mighty muscles are well-broken to my saddle."

"If that needed proof," he muttered.

"It needed none. There's proof enough, Hull, in what's happening even now, if I judge the time rightly. I mean your Harriers slipping through their ancient sewer right into my trap behind the barn."

He was thunderstruck. "You –are you you *must* be a witch!" he gasped.

"Perhaps. But it wasn't witchcraft that led me to put the thought of that sewer into your head, Hull. Do you remember now that it was *my* suggestion, given last evening there in the hallway?

I knew quite well that you'd put the bait before the Harriers."

His brain was reeling. "But why—why—"

"Oh," she said indifferently, "it amused me to see you play the traitor twice, Hull Tarvish."

IX

THE PRINCESS stepped close to him, her magnificent eyes gentle as an angel's. "Poor, strong, weak Hull Tarvish!" she breathed. "Now you shall have a lesson in the cost of weakness!"

He scarcely heard her. His gyrating mind struggled with an idea. The Harriers were creeping singly into the trap, but they could not all be through the tunnel. If he could warn them—His eyes shifted to the bellpull in the hall beside the guard, the rope that tolled the bronze bell in the belfry to summon public gatherings, or to call aid to fight fires.

His great arm flashed suddenly, sweeping the Princess from her feet and crashing her dainty figure violently against the wall. Then he was upon the startled guard, thrusting him up and over the rail of the stair-well to drop with a sullen bump below. And then he threw his weight on the bell-rope, and the great voice of bronze boomed out, again and again.

But Black Margot was on her feet, with the green hell-sparks flickering in her eyes and her face a lovely mask of fury. Men came rushing up the stairs with drawn weapons. Hull gave a last tug on the rope and turned to face death. Half a dozen weapons were on him.

"Hold him—for me!" gasped the Princess. "Take him—to the barn!"

Behind the barn a close-packed mass of dark figures huddled near the mouth of the ancient tunnel where the bushes were trampled away, and a brownclad file of Empire woods runners surrounded them. A few figures lay sprawled on the turf, and Hull smiled a little as he saw that some were Empire men. Then his eyes strayed to the Princess where she faced a dark-haired officer.

"How many, Lebeau?"

"A hundred and forty or fifty, Your Highness."

"Not half! Why are you not pursuing the rest through the tunnel?"

"Because, Your Highness, one of them pulled the shoring and the roof down upon himself, and blocked us off. We're digging him out now."

"By then they'll have left their burrow." She strode over to Hull. "Where does this tunnel end?"

File Ormson's great voice rumbled out of the mass of prisoners. "Hull! Hull! Was this trap your doing?"

Hull made no answer, but Black Margot herself replied. "No," she snapped, "but the warning bell was."

"Then why do you spare him?"

Her eyes glitered icy green. "To kill in my own way, Weed," she said.

Her eyes blazed chill emerald fire into Hull's. He met her glance squarely, and said in a low voice, "Do you grant any favors to a man about to die?"

"I am not disposed to grant favors to you, Hull Tarvish, who have twice laid hands of violence on me."

His voice dropped almost to a whisper. "It is the lives of my companions I ask."

She raised her eyebows in surprise, then shook her ebony flame of hair. "How can I? I remained here purposely to wipe them out."

"I ask their lives," he repeated.

A curious, whimsical fire danced green in her eyes. "I will try," she promised. "Lebeau!" she snapped. "Hold back a while."

She strode into the gap between the prisoners and her own men. Hand on hip she surveyed the Harriers, while the moonlight lent her beauty an aura that was incredible, unearthly. A loveliness that was cold, deadly.

"Now," she said, passing her glance over the group, "on my promise of amnesty, how many of you would join me?"

TWO figures moved forward, and the Harriers stirred angrily. Hull recognized the men; they were stragglers of the Confederation army, Chicago men, good fighters but merely mercenaries, changing sides as mood or advantage moved them.

"You two," said the Princess, "are you Ormiston men?"

"No," said one. "Both of us come from the shores of Mitchin."

"Very well," she said calmly. With a movement swift as arrow flight she snatched her weapon from her belt; the blue beam spat twice, and the men crumbled, one with face burned carbon-black, and both sending forth an odorous wisp of flesh-seared smoke.

She faced the aghast group. "Now," she said, "who is your leader?"

File Ormson stepped forth, scowling and grim. "What do you want of me?"

"Will you treat with me? Will your men follow your agreements?"

File nodded. "They have small choice."

"Good. Now that I have sifted the traitors from your ranks I shall make my offer." She smiled at the squat ironsmith. "Would you, with your great muscles and warrior's heart follow a woman?"

The scowl vanished in surprise. "Follow you? *You?*"

"Yes." Hull watched her in fascination as she used her voice, her eyes, her unearthly beauty intensified by the moonlight, all on hulking File Ormson. "Yes, I mean to follow me," she repeated softly. "You are brave men, all of you."

"But—" File gulped, "our others—"

"I promise you need not fight against your companions. I will release any of you who will not follow me. And your lands—it is your lands you fight for, is it not? I will not touch one acre save the eldarch's." She paused. "Well?"

Suddenly File's booming laugh roared out. "By God!" he swore. "If you mean what you say, there's nothing to fight about! For my part, I'm with you!" He turned on his men. "Who follows me?"

The group stirred. A few stepped forward, then a few more, and then, with a shout, the whole mass. "Good!" roared File. He raised his great hard hand to his heart, in the Empire salute. "To Black—To the Princess Margaret!" he bellowed. "To a warrior!"

She smiled and dropped her eyes as if in modesty. When the cheer had passed, she addressed File Ormson again. "You will send men to your others?" she asked. "Let them come in on the same terms."

"They'll come!" growled File.

The Princess nodded. "Lebeau," she called, "order off your men. These are our allies."

The Princess stepped close to Hull, smiling maliciously up into his perplexed face.

"Will you die happy now?" she asked softly.

"No man dies happy," he growled.

"I granted your wish, Hull."

"If your promises can be trusted," he retorted bitterly.

She shrugged. "I do not break my given word. The Harriers are safe."

Beyond her, men came suddenly from the tunnel mouth, dragging something dark behind them.

"The Weed who pulled down the roof, Your Highness," said Lebeau.

She glanced back of her, and pursed her dainty lips in surprise. "The eldarch! The dotard died bravely enough."

VAIL slipped by with a low moan of anguish, and Hull watched her kneel by her father's body. A spasm of pity shook him as he realized that now she was utterly, completely alone. Enoch had died in the ambush of the previous night, old Marcus lay dead here before her, and he, Hull, was condemned to death. He bent a slow, helpless, pitying smile on her, but there was nothing he could do or say.

And Black Margot, after the merest glance, turned back to Hull. "Now," she said, the ice in her voice again, "I deal

with you at last!"

He faced her dumbly. "Will you have the mercy to deal quickly, then?" he muttered.

"Mercy? I do not know the word where you're concerned, Hull." She moved closer, "I cannot bear the touch of violence, Hull, and you have laid violent hands on me twice. Twice!"

"One was to save your life," he said, "and the other to rectify my own unwitting treason."

She smiled coldly. "Well argued, Hull, but you die none the less in the way I wish." She turned. "Back to the house!" she commanded, and he strode away, between the six guards who still flanked him.

She led them into the lower room that had been the Master's. There she sat idly in a deep chair of ancient craftsmanship, lit a black cigarette at the lamp, and thrust her slim legs carelessly before her, gazing at Hull. But he, staring through the window behind her, could see Vail Ormiston weeping beside the body of her father.

"Now," said the Princess, "how would you like to die, Hull?"

"Of old age!" he snapped. "And if you will not permit that, then as quickly as possible."

"I might grant the second," she observed. "I *might*."

The thought of Vail was still torturing him. At last he said, "Your Highness, is your courage equal to the ordeal of facing me alone? I want to ask something that I will not ask in others' ears."

She laughed contemptuously. "Get out!" she snapped at the silent guards. And, as they left: "Hull, do you think I fear *you?* I tell you your great muscles and stubborn heart are no more than those of Eblis, the black stallion. Must I prove it again to you?"

"No," he muttered. "God help me, but I know it's true. I'm not the match for Black Margot."

"Nor is any other man," she countered. Then, more softly, "But if ever I do meet the man who can conquer me, if ever he exists, he *will* have something of you in him, Hull. Your great, slow strength, and your stubborn honesty, and your courage. I promise that." She paused, her face now pure as a marble saint's. "So say what you have to say, Hull. What do you ask?"

"My life," he said bluntly.

Her green eyes widened in surprise. "You, Hull? *You* beg your life? *You?*"

"Not for myself," he muttered. "There's Vail Ormiston weeping over her father. Enoch, who would have married her and loved her, is dead in last night's ambush, and if I die, she's left alone. I ask my life for her. She'll die without someone to help her through this time of torment."

"Let her die, Hull," said the Princess coolly, "as I think you'll die in the next moment or so!" Her hand rested on the stock of the weapon at her belt. "I grant you your second choice—the quick death."

X

BLACK MARGOT ground out her cigarette with her left hand against the polished wood of the table top; her right rested inexorably on her weapon.

A voice spoke behind Hull, a familiar, pleasant voice.

"Do I intrude, Margaret?"

He whirled. It was Old Einar, thrusting his good-humored, wrinkled visage through the opening he had made in the doorway. He grinned at Hull, flung the door wider, and slipped into the chamber.

"Einar!" cried the Princess, springing from her chair. "Einar Olin! Are you still in the world?" Her tones took on suddenly the note of deep pity. "But so old—so old!"

The old man took her free hand. "It is forty years since last I saw you, Margaret—and I was fifty then."

"But so old!" she repeated. "Einar, have *I* changed?"

He peered at her. "Not physically,

my dear. But from the stories that go up and down the continent, you are hardly the gay madcap that N'Orleans worshipped as the Princess Peggy, nor even the valiant little warrior they used to call the Maid of Orleans.

"Seeing you now, Margaret, I wonder instead if I were not very wise to refuse immortality. Youth is too great a restlessness to bear for so long a time, and you have borne it less than a century. What will you be in another fifty years? In another hundred, if Martin Sair's art keeps its power? What will you be?"

She shook her head; her green eyes grew deep and sorrowful.

He pointed a gnarled finger at Hull. "What do you want of my young friend here?"

Her eyes flashed emerald, and she drew her hand from that of Old Einar. "I plan to kill him."

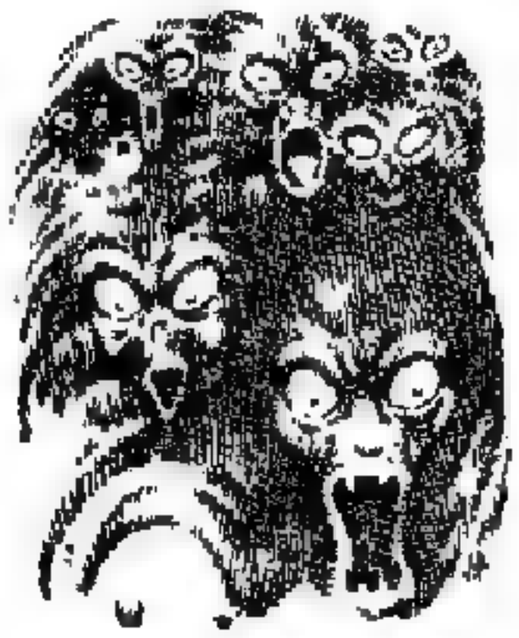
"Indeed? And why?"

"Why?" her voice chilled. "Because he struck me with his hands. Twice."

The old man smiled. "But I think I shall ask you to forgive young Hull Tarvish."

"Why should I?" asked the Princess. "Why do you think a word from you can save him?"

"I am still Olin," said the aged one,



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"I don't know, Einar. I don't know. I might have been different, Einar, had you joined us. I could have loved you, Einar."

"Yes," he agreed wryly. "I was afraid of that, and it was one of the reasons for my refusal. You see, I *did* love you, Margaret. All of us did at one time or another. 'Flame-struck', we used to call it." He smiled reflectively. "Are any left save me of all those who loved you?"

"Just Jorgensen," she answered sadly. "If he has not yet killed himself in his quest for the secret of the Ancient's wings."*

"Well," said Olin dryly, "my years will yet make a mock of their immortality."

*He did, just one week after this date, the date of the Battle of Selui. He crashed at N'Orleans after a flight of thirty minutes in an atomic rocket of the Ring type.

meeting her green eyes steadily with his watery blue ones. "I still carry Joaquin's seal."

"As if that could stop *me!*" But the cold fire died slowly in her gaze, and again her eyes were sad. "But you are still Olin, the Father of Power," she murmured.

With a sudden gesture she thrust her weapon back into her belt. "I spare him again," she said; and then, in tones gone strangely dull: "It is a weakness of mine that I cannot kill those who love me in a certain way—a weakness that will cost me dear some day."

OLIN twisted his old lips in that skull-like smile, turning to the silent youth.

"Hull," he said kindly, "if you're curious enough to tempt your luck further,

listen to this old man's advice. Go twist the tail of a lion before you again try the wrath of Black Margot. And now get out of here."

"Not yet, Hull," snapped the Princess. "I have still my score to settle with you." She turned back to Olin. "Where do you wander now, Einar?"

"To N'Orleans. I am homesick besides for the Great City." He paused. "I have seen Joaquin. Selui has fallen."

"I know—I ride to meet him tonight."

"He has left Jacob Sair as governor."

"I know, Einar."

"He has sent representatives to Chicago." Old Einar shook his thin white hair. "What will be the end of this, Margaret?" he asked gently. "After Chicago is taken—what then?"

"Then the land north of the saltless seas, and east of them. N'York and all the cities on the ocean shore. Later South America, Europe, Asia and Africa."

"And after all of them?"

"Afterward," she replied wearily, "we can rest. The fierce destiny that drives Joaquin surely cannot drive him beyond the boundaries of the world."

"And so," said Olin, "you fight your way around the world so that you can rest at the end of the journey. Then why not rest now, Margaret? Must you pillow your head on the globe of the planet?"

Fury flamed green in her eyes. She raised her hand and struck the old man across his lips, but it must have been lightly, for he still smiled.

"Fool!" she cried. "Then I will see to it that there is always war! Between me and Joaquin, if need be—or between me and anyone—*anyone*—so that I can fight!" She paused panting. "Leave me, Einar," she said tensely. "I do not like the things you bring to mind."

Still smiling, the old man backed away. At the door he paused. "I will see you before I die, Margaret," he promised, and was gone.

Slowly, almost wearily, the Princess turned to face Hull.

"Hull," she said gently, "what do you think of me now?"

"I think you are a black flame blowing cold across the world. I think a demon drives you."

"And do you hate me so bitterly?"

"I pray every second to hate you."

"Then see, Hull." With her little fingers she took his great hands and placed them about the perfect curve of her throat. "Here I give you my life for the taking. You have only to twist once with these mighty hands of yours and Black Margot will be out of the world forever." She paused. "Must I beg you?"

HULL felt as if molten metal flowed upward through his arms from the touch of her white skin. His fingers were rigid as metal bars, and all the great strength of them could not put one feather's weight of pressure on the soft throat they circled. And deep in the lambent emerald flames that burned in her eyes he saw again the fire of mockery—jeering, taunting.

"You will not?" she said, lifting away his hands, but holding them in hers. "Then you do not hate me?"

"You know I don't!" he groaned.

"And you do love me?"

"Please," he muttered. "Is it necessary to torture me? I need no proof of your mastery."

"Then say you love me."

"Heaven forgive me for it," he whispered, "but I do."

She dropped his hands and smiled. "Then listen to me, Hull. You love little Vail with a truer love, and month by month memory fades before reality. After awhile there will be nothing left in you of Black Margot, but there will be always Vail. I go now hoping never to see you again, but—" and her eyes chilled to green ice— "before I go I settle my score with you."

She donned her silver gauntlets, raised her hand.

"This for your treachery!" she said, and raked him savagely across his right

cheek. Blood spouted, but he stood stolid. "This for your violence!" she said, and the silver gauntlet tore his left cheek. Then her eyes softened. "And this," she murmured, "for your love!"

Her arms circled him, her body was warm against him, and her exquisite lips burned against his. He felt as if he embraced a flame for a moment, and then she was gone, and a part of his soul went with her. When he heard the hoofs of the stallion, Eblis, pounding beyond the window, he turned and walked slowly out of the house, to where Vail still crouched beside her father's body. She clung to him, wiped the blood from his cheeks, and strangely, her words were not of her father, or of the sparing of Hull's life, but of Black Margot.

"I knew you lied to save me," she murmured. "I know you never loved her."

And Hull, in whom there was no falsehood, drew her close to him and said nothing.

But Black Margot rode north from Selui through the night. In the sky before her were thin shadows leading phantom armies; Alexander the Great, Attila, Genghis Khan, Tamerlane, Napoleon, and clearer than all, the battle queen Semiramis. All the mighty conquerers of the past, and where were *they*, where were their empires, and where, even, were their bones? Far in the south were the graves of men who loved her, all except Old Einar, who tottered like a feeble gray ghost across the world to find his.

At her side, Joaquin Smith turned as if to speak, stared, and remained silent. He was not accustomed to the sight of tears in the eyes and on the cheeks of Black Margot.*

*All conversation ascribed to the Princess Margaret in this story is taken verbatim from an anonymous volume published in Urbs in the year 186, called "Loves of the Black Flame." It is credited to Jacques Lebeau, officer in command of the Black Flame's personal guard.

[*Turn page for "The Black Flame"*]

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THE BLACK FLAME

He lifted her in his arms and struggled for the door

THE BLACK FLAME

A Novel by STANLEY G. WEINBAUM

She was half sweet, provocative goddess, half cruel devil who would steal his knowledge—and his heart!

He lifted her in his arms and struggled for the door

I

THOMAS MARSHALL CONNOR was about to die. The droning voice of the prison chaplain gradually dulled his perception instead of stimulating his mind. Everything was hazy and indistinct to the condemned man. He was going to the electric chair in just ten minutes to pay the supreme penalty because he had accidentally killed a man with his bare fists.

Connor, vibrantly alive, vigorous and healthy, only twenty-six, a brilliant young engineer, was going to die. And, knowing, he did not care. But there was nothing at all nebulous about the gray stone and cold iron bars of the death cell. There was nothing uncertain about the split down his trouser leg and the shaven spot on his head.

The condemned man was acutely aware of the solidarity of material things about him. The world he was leaving was concrete and substantial. The approaching footsteps of the death guard sounded heavily in the distance.

Then the cell door opened, and the chaplain ceased his murmuring. Passively Thomas Marshall Connor accepted his blessings, and calmly took his position between his guards for his last voluntary walk.

He remained in his state of detachment as they seated him in the chair, strapped his body and fastened the electrodes. He heard the faint rustling of the witnesses and the nervous, rapid scratching of reporters' pencils. He could imagine their adjectives: "Calloused murderer" . . . "Brazenly indifferent to his fate."

But it was as if the matter concerned a third party.

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He simply relaxed and waited. To die so quickly and painlessly was more a relief than anything. He was not even aware when the warden gave his signal. There was a sudden silent flash of blue light. And then—nothing at all.

SO THIS was death. The slow and majestic drifting through the Stygian void, borne on the ageless tides of eternity.

Peace, at last—peace, and quiet, and rest.

But what was this sensation like the glimpse of a faint, faraway light which winked on and off like a star? After an interminable period the light became fixed and steady, a thing of annoyance. Thomas Marshall Connor slowly became aware of the fact of his existence as an entity, in some unknown state. The sense and memories that were his personality struggled weakly to reassemble themselves into a thinking unity of being—and he became conscious of pain and physical torture.

There was a sound of shrill voices, and a stir of fresh air. He became aware of his body again. He lay quietly, inert and exhausted. But not as lifeless as he had lain for—how long?

When the shrill voices sounded again, Connor opened unseeing eyes and stared at the blackness just above him. After a space he began to see, but not to comprehend. The blackness became a jagged, pebbled roof no more than twelve inches from his eyes, rough and unfinished like the underside of a concrete walk.

The light became a glimmer of daylight from a point near his right shoulder.

Another sensation crept into his awareness. He was horribly, bitterly cold. Not with the chill of winter air, but with the terrible frigidity of intergalactic space. Yet he was on—no, *in*—earth of some sort. It was as if icy water flowed in his veins instead of blood. Yet he felt completely dehydrated. His body was as inert as though detached from his brain, but he was cruelly imprisoned within it. He became conscious of a growing resentment of this fact.

Then, stimulated by the shrilling, piping voices and the patter of tiny feet out there somewhere to the right, he made a tremendous effort to move. There was a dry, withered crackling sound like the crumpling of old parchment, but indubitably his right arm had lifted!

The exertion left him weak and nauseated. For a time he lay as if in a stupor. Then a second effort proved easier. After another timeless interval of struggling torment his legs yielded reluctant obedience to his brain. Again he lay quietly, exhausted, but gathering stength for the supreme effort of bursting from his crypt.

For he knew now where he was. He lay in what remained of his grave. How or why, he did not know. That was to be determined.

WITH ALL his weak strength he thrust against the left side of his queer tomb, moving his body against the crevice at his right. Only a thin veil of loose gravel and rubble blocked the way to the open. As his shoulder struck the pile, it gave and slid away, outward and downward, in a miniature avalanche.

Blinding daylight smote Connor like an agony. The shrill voices screamed.

"'S moom!" a child's voice cried tremulously. "'S moom again!"

Connor panted from exertion, and struggled to emerge from his hole, each movement producing another noise like rattling paper. Suddenly he was free. The last of the gravel tinkled away and he rolled abruptly down a small declivity to rest limply at the bottom of the hill.

He saw now that erosion had cut through this burial ground—wherever it was—and had opened a way for him through the side of the grave. His sight was strangely dim, but he became aware of half a dozen little figures in a frightened semi-circle beyond him.

His right hand clutched the delicate curve of her throat

Children! Children in strange modernistic garb of bright colors, but nevertheless human children who stared at him with wide-open mouths and popping eyes. Their curiously cherubic faces were set in masks of horrified terror.

Suddenly recalling the terrors he had sometimes known in his own childhood, Connor was surprised they did not flee. He stretched forth an imploring hand and made a desperate effort to speak. This was his first attempt to use his voice, and he found that he could not.

The spell of dread that held the children frozen was instantly broken. One of them gave a dismayed cry.

"A-a-a-h! 'S a specker!"

In a panic, shrieking that cry, the entire group turned and fled. They disappeared around the shoulder of the eroded hill, and Connor was left horribly alone. He groaned from the depths of his despair and was conscious of a faint rasping noise through his cracked and parched lips.

He realized suddenly that he was quite naked—his shroud had long since moldered to dust. At the same moment that full comprehension of what this meant came to him, he was gazing in horror at his body. Bones! Nothing but bones, covered with a dirty, parchment-like skin.

So tightly did his skin cover his skeletal framework that the very structure of the bones showed through. He could see the articulation at knuckles, knees, and toes. And the parchment skin was cracked like an ancient Chinese vase, checked like aged varnish. He was a horror from the tomb, and he nearly fainted at the realization.

After a swooning space, he endeavored to arise. Finding that he could not, he began crawling painfully and laboriously toward a puddle of water from the last rain. Reaching it, he leaned over to place his lips against its surface, reckless of its potability, and sucked in the liquid until a vast roaring filled his ears.

The moment of dizziness passed. He felt somewhat better, and his breathing rasped a bit less painfully in his moistened throat. His eyesight was slowly clearing and, as he leaned above the little pool, he glimpsed the specter reflected there. It looked like a skull—a face with lips shrunken away from the teeth, so fleshless that it might have been a death's-head.

"Oh, God!" he called out aloud, and his voice croaked like that of a sick raven. "What and where am I!"

In the back of his mind all through this weird experience, there had been a sense of something strange aside from his emergence from a tomb in the form of a living scarecrow. He stared up at the sky.

The vault of heaven was blue and fleecy with the whitest of clouds. The sun was shining as he had never thought to see it shine again. The grass was green. The ground was normally earthy. Everything was as it should be—but there was a strangeness about it that frightened him. Instinctively he knew that something was direfully amiss.

It was not the fact that he failed to recognize his surroundings. He had not had the strength to explore; neither did he know where he had been buried. It was that indefinable homing instinct possessed in varying degree by all animate things. That instinct was out of gear. His time sense had stopped with the throwing of that electric switch—how long ago? Somehow, lying there under the warming rays of the sun, he felt like an alien presence in a strange country.

"Lost!" he whimpered like a child. . . .

After a long space in which he remained in a sort of stupor, he became aware of the sound of footsteps. Dully he looked up. A group of men, led by one of the children, was advancing slowly toward him. They wore brightly colored shirts—red, blue, violet—and queer baggy trousers gathered at the ankles in an exotic style.

With a desperate burst of energy, Connor gained his knees. He extended a

pleading, skeleton-like claw.

"Help me!" he croaked in a hoarse whisper.

The beardless, queerly effeminate-looking men halted and stared at him in horror.

"'Assim!" shrilled the child's voice. "'S a specker. 'S dead."

One of the men stepped forward, looking from Connor to the gaping hole in the hillside.

"Wassup?" he questioned.

Connor could only repeat his croaking plea for aid.

"'Esick," spoke another man gravely. "Sleeper, eh?"

There was a murmur of consultation among the men with the bright clothes and oddly soft, woman-like voices.

"T' Evanie!" decided one. "T' Evanie, the Sorc'ess."

They closed quickly around the half reclining Connor and lifted him gently. He was conscious of being borne along the curving cut to a yellow country road, and then black oblivion descended once more to claim him.

When he regained consciousness the next time, he found that he was within walls, reclining on a soft bed of some kind. He had a vague dreamy impression of a girlish face with bronze hair and features like Raphael's angels bending over him. Something warm and sweetish, like glycerin, trickled down his throat.

Then, to the whispered accompaniment of that queerly slurred English speech, he sank into the blissful repose of deep sleep.

THERE were successive intervals of dream and oblivion, of racking pain and terrible nauseating weakness, of voices murmuring queer, unintelligible words that yet were elusively familiar.

Then one day he awoke to the consciousness of a summer morning. Birds twittered; in the distance children shouted. Clear of mind at last, he lay on a cushioned couch puzzling over his whereabouts, even his identity, for nothing within his vision indicated where or who he was.

The first thing that caught his attention was his own right hand. Paper-thin, incredibly bony, it lay like the hand of death on the rosy coverlet, so transparent that the very color shone through. He could not raise it; only a twitching of the horrible fingers attested its union with his body.

The room itself was utterly unfamiliar in its almost magnificently simple furnishings. There were neither pictures nor ornaments. Only several chairs of aluminum-like metal, a gleaming silvery table holding a few ragged old volumes, a massive cabinet against the opposite wall, and a chandelier pendant by a chain from the ceiling.

He tried to call out. A faint croak issued.

The response was startlingly immediate. A soft voice said, "Hahya?" in his ear and he turned his head painfully to face the girl of the bronze hair, seated at his side. She smiled gently.

She was dressed in curious green baggy trousers gathered at the ankle, and a brilliant green shirt. She had rolled the full sleeves to her shoulders. Hers was like the costume of the men who had brought him here.

"Whahya?" she said softly.

He understood.

"Oh, I'm—uh—Thomas Connor, of course."

"Thomas Connor o'Course?" she echoed.

He smiled feebly.

"No. Just Thomas Connor."

"F'm 'ere?"

"From St. Louis."

"Selui? 'S far off."

Far off? Then where was he? Suddenly a fragment of memory returned. The trial—Ruth—that catastrophic episode of the grim chair. Ruth! The yellow-haired girl he had once adored, who was to have been his wife—the girl who had coldly sworn his life away because he had killed the man she loved.

Dimly memory came back of how he

had found her in that other man's arms on the very eve of their wedding; of his bitter realization that the man he had called friend had stolen Ruth from him. His outraged passions had flamed, the fire had blinded him; and when the ensuing battle had ended, the man had been crumpled with a broken neck on the green sward of the terrace.

He had been electrocuted for that. He had been strapped in that chair!

Then—then the niche on the hill. But how? Had he by some miracle survived the burning current? He must have—and he still had the penalty to pay!

He tried desperately to rise.

"Must leave here!" he muttered. "Get away—must get away." A new thought. "No! I'm legally dead. They can't touch me now; no double jeopardy in this country. I'm safe!"

VOICES sounded in the next room, discussing him.

"F'm Selui, he say," said a man's voice. "Longo, too."

"Eah," said another. "'S lucky to live—lucky! 'L be rich."

That meant nothing to him. He raised his hand with a great effort; it glistened in the light with an oil of some sort. It was no longer cracked, and the ghost of a layer of tissue softened the bones. His flesh was growing back.

His throat felt dry. He drew a breath that ended in a tickling cough.

"Could I have some water?" he asked the girl.

"N-n-n!" She shook her head. "N' water. S'm licket?"

"Licket?" Must be liquid, he reflected. He nodded, and dank the mug of thick fluid she held to his lips. He grinned his thanks, and she sat beside him. He wondered what sort of colony was this into which he had fallen—with their exotic dress and queer, clipped English.

His eyes wandered appreciatively over his companion. Even if she were some sort of foreigner, she was gloriously beautiful, with her bronze hair gleaming above the emerald costume.

"C'n talk," she said finally as if in permission.

He accepted. "What's your name?"

"M Evanie Sair. Evanie the Sorc'ess."

"Evanie the Sorceress!" he echoed. "Pretty name—Evanie. Why the Sorceress, though? Do you tell fortunes?"

The question puzzled her.

"N'onstan," she murmured.

"I mean—what do you do?"

"Sorc'y." At his mystified look, she amplified it. "To give strength—to make well." She touched his fleshless arm.

"But that's medicine—a science. Not sorcery."

"Eah. Science, sorc'y. 'S all one. My father, Evan Sair the Wizard, taught me." Her face shadowed. "'S dead now." Then, abruptly: "Whe's your money?" she asked.

He stared. "Why, in St. Louis. In a bank."

"Oh!" she exclaimed. "N-n-n! Selui! N'safe!"

"Why not?" He started. "Has there been another flood of bank-bustings?"

The girl looked puzzled.

"N'safe," she reiterated. "Urbs is better. For very long, Urbs is better." She paused. "When'd you sleep?"

"Why, last night."

"N-n-n. The long sleep."

The long sleep! It struck him with stunning force that his last memories before that terrible awakening had been of a September world—and this was mid-summer! A horror gripped him. How long—how long had he lain in his grave? Weeks? No—months, at least.

He shuddered as the girl repeated gently, "When?"

"In September," he muttered.

"What year?"

Surprise strengthened him. "Year? Nineteen thirty-eight, of course!"

She rose suddenly. "'S no Nineteen thirty-eight. 'S only Eight forty-six now!"

THEN she was gone, nor on her return would she permit him to talk. The day vanished. He slept, and an-

other day dawned and passed. Still Evanie Sair refused to allow him to talk again, and the succeedings days found him fuming and puzzled. Little by little, however, her strange clipped English became familiar.

So he lay thinking of his situation, his remarkable escape, the miracle that had somehow softened the discharge of Missouri's generators. And he strengthened. A day came when Evanie again permitted speech, while he watched her preparing his food.

"Y'onger, Tom?" she asked gently. "L bea soon." He understood; she was saying, "Are you hungry, Tom? I'll be there soon."

He answered with her own affirmative "Eah," and watched her place the meal in a miraculous cook stove that could be trusted to prepare it without burning.

"Evanie," he began, "how long have I been here?"

"Three months," said Evanie. "You were very sick."

"But how long was I asleep?"

"You ought to know," retorted Evanie. "I told you this was Eight forty-six."

He frowned.

"The year Eight forty-six of what?"

"Just Eight forty-six," Evanie said matter-of-factly. "Of the Enlightenment, of course. What year did you sleep?"

"I told you Nineteen thirty-eight," insisted Connor, perplexed. "Nineteen thirty-eight. A.D."

"Oh," said Evanie, as if humoring a child. Then, "A.D.?" she repeated. "Anno Domini, that means. Year of the Master. But the Master is nowhere near nineteen hundred years old."

Connor was nonplussed. He and Evanie seemed to be talking at cross-purposes. He calmly started again.

"Listen to me," he said grimly. "Suppose you tell me exactly what you think I am—all about it, just as if I were a—oh, a Martian. In simple words."

"I know what you are," said Evanie. "You're a Sleeper. Often they wake with muddled minds."

"And what," he pursued doggedly, "is a Sleeper?"

Surprisingly Evanie answered that, in a clear, understandable, but most astonishing way. Almost as astonished herself that Connor should not know the answer to his question.

"A Sleeper," she said simply, and Connor was now able to understand her peculiar clipped speech—the speech of all these people—with comparative ease, "is one of those who undertake electrolepsis. That is, have put themselves to sleep for a long term of years to make money."

"How? By exhibiting themselves?"

"No," she said. "I mean that those who want wealth badly enough, but won't spend years working for it, undertake the Sleep. You must remember that, even if you have forgotten so much else. They put their money in the banks organized for the Sleepers. You will remember. They guarantee six per cent. You see, don't you? At that rate a Sleeper's money increases three hundred times a century—three hundred units for each one deposited. Six per cent doubles their money every twelve years. A thousand becomes a fortune of three hundred thousand, if the Sleeper outlasts a century—and if he lives."

"Fairy tales," Connor said contemptuously, but now he understood her question about the whereabouts of his money, when he had first awakened. "What institution can guarantee six per cent with safety? What could they invest in?"

"They invest in one per cent Urban bonds."

"And run at a loss, I suppose!"

"No. Their profits are enormous—from the funds of the nine out of every ten Sleepers who fail to awaken!"

"So I'm a Sleeper!" Connor said slowly. "I wish you would tell me the truth."

Evanie gazed anxious down at him. "Electrolepsis often muddles one," she murmured.

"I'm *not* muddled!" he protested. "I want truth, that's all. I want to know the date."

"It's the middle of July, Eight hundred and forty-six," Evanie said patiently.

"The devil it is! Perhaps I slept backward then! I want to know what happened to me."

"Then suppose you tell," Evanie said gently.

"I will!" he cried frantically. "I'm the Thomas Marshall Connor of the newspapers—or don't you read 'em. I'm the man who was tried for murder, and electrocuted. Tom Connor of St. Louis—*St. Louis!* Do you understand?"

Evanie's gentle features went suddenly pale.

"St. Louis!" she whispered. "St. Louis—the ancient name of Selui! Before the Dark Centuries. Impossible!"

"Not impossible. It's true," Connor said grimly. "Too painfully true."

"Electrocution!" Evanie whispered in awe. "The Ancients' punishment!"

She stared as if fascinated, then cried excitedly: "Could electrolepsis happen by accident? Could it? But no! A milliampere too much and brain's destroyed; a millivolt too little and asepsis fails. Either way's death—but it has happened if what you are telling is the truth, Tom Connor! You must have experienced the impossible!"

"And what is electrolepsis?" Connor asked, desperately calm.

"It's—it's the Sleep!" whispered the tense girl. "Electrical paralysis of the part of the brain before Rolando's Fissure. It's what the sleepers use, but only for a century, or a very litle more. This—this is fantastic! You have slept since before the Dark Centuries! Not less than a thousand years!"

II

A WEEK, the third since Connor's awakening to sane thought, had passed. He sat on a carved stone bench before Evanie's cottage and reveled in the burning canopy of stars and the copper moon. He was living, if what he had been told was true—and he was forced to believe it now—after untold billions had passed into eternity.

Evanie must have been right. He was convinced by her gentle insistence, by the queer English on every tongue, by a subtle difference in the very world about him. It wasn't the same world—quite.

He sighed contentedly, breathing the cool night air. He had learned much of the new age from Evanie, though much was still mysteriously veiled. Evanie had spoken of the city of Urbs and the Master, but only vaguely. One day he asked her why.

"Because—" she hesitated "well, because it's best for you to form your own judgments. We are not fond of Urbs and the Immortals, and I would not like to influence you, Tom; for in all truth, it's the partisans of the Master who have the best of it, not his enemies. Urbs is in power; it will probably remain in power long after our lifetimes, since it has ruled for seven centuries."

Connor looked at the gentle Evanie.

"I'm sure," he said, "that your side of the question is mine."

Abruptly she withdrew something from her pocket and passed it to him. He bent over it—a golden disc, a coin. He made out the lettering, "10 Units," and the figure of a snake circling a globe, its tail in its mouth.

"The Midgard Serpent," said Evanie. "I don't know why, but that's what it's called."

Connor reversed the coin. There was revealed the embossed portrait of a man's head, whose features, even in miniature, looked cold, austere, powerful. Connor read:

"Orbis Terrarum Imperator Dominusque Urbis."

"Emperor of the World and Master of the City," he translated.

"Yes. That is the Master." Evanie's voice was serious as she took the coin. "This is the money of Urbs. To understand Urbs and the Master you must of

course know something of history since your—sleep."

"History?" he repeated.

She nodded. "Since the Dark Centuries. Some day one of our patriarchs will tell you more than I know. For I know little of your mighty ancient world. It seems to us an incredible age, with its vast cities, its fierce nations, its inconceivable teeming populations, its terrific energies and its flaming genius. Great wars, great industries, great art—and then great wars again."

"But you can tell me—" Connor began, a little impatiently. Evanie shook her head.

"Not now," she said quickly. "For now I must hasten to friends who will discuss with me a matter of great moment. Perhaps some day you may learn of that, too."

And she was gone before Tom Connor could say a word to detain her. He was left alone with his thoughts -clashing, devastating thoughts sometimes, for there was so much to be learned in this strange world into which he had been plunged.

In so many ways it was a strange, new world, Connor thought, as he watched the girl disappear down the road that slanted from her hilltop home to the village. From where he sat on that bench of hewn stone he could glimpse the village at the foot of the hill —a group of buildings, low, made of some white stone. All the structures were classical, with pure Doric columns. Ormon was the name of the village, Evanie had said.

It was all strange to him. Not only were the people so vastly at variance with those he had known, but the physical world was bewilderingly different.

Gazing beyond the village, and bringing his attention back to the hills and the forests about him, Tom Connor wondered if they, too, would be different.

He had to know.

The springtime landscape beckoned. Connor's strength had returned to such an extent that he arose from his bench in the sun and headed toward the green of the forest stretching away behind Evanie's home. It was an enchanting prospect. The trees had the glistening new green of young foliage, and emerald green grass waved in the fields that stretched away down the hillsides and carpeted the plains.

Birds were twittering in the trees as he entered the forest birds of all varieties, in profusion, with gaily-colored plumage. Their numbers and fearlessness would have surprised Connor had he not remembered something Evanie had told him. Urbs, she had said, had wiped out all objectionable stinging insects—flies, corn-worms and the like—centuries ago, and the birds had helped. So had certain parasites that had been bred for the purpose.

"They only had to let the birds increase," Evanie had said, "by destroying their chief enemy, the Egyptian cat—the house-cat. It was acclimatized here and running wild in the woods, so they bred a parasite, the Feliphage, which destroyed it. Since then there have been many birds, and fewer insects."

It was pleasant to stroll through that green forest, to that bird orchestral accompaniment. The spring breeze touched Tom Connor's face lightly, and for the first time in his life he knew what it was to stroll in freedom, untouched by the pestiferous annoyance of mosquitoes, swarming gnats and midges, or other stinging insects that once had made the greenwood sometimes akin to purgatory.

What a boon to humanity! Honey bees buzzed in the dandelions in the carpeting grass, and drank the sweetness from spring flowers, but no mites or flies buzzed about Connor's uncovered, upflung head as he swung along briskly.

CONNOR did not know how far he had penetrated into the depths of the newly green woods when he found himself following the course of a small stream. Its silvery waters sparkled in

the sunlight filtering through the trees as it moved along, lazily somnolent.

Now and then he passed mossy and viny heaps of stones, interesting to him, since he knew, from what he had been told, that they were the sole reminders of ancient structures erected before the Dark Centuries. Those heaps of stones had once formed buildings in another, long-gone age—his own age.

Idly following the little stream, he came at last to a wide bend where the stream came down from higher ground to spill in a litle splashing falls.

He had just rounded the bend, his eyes on a clear, still pool beyond, when he stopped stock-still, his eyes widening incredulously.

It was as if he were seeing spread before him a picture, well known in his memory, and now brought to animate life. Connor had thought himself alone in that wood, but he was not. Sharing it with him, within short yards of where he stood, was the most beautiful creature on whom he had ever looked.

It was hard to believe she was a living, breathing creature and not an imaginary being. No sound had warned her of his approach and, sublimely unaware that she was not alone, she held the pose in which Connor had first seen her, like some lovely wood sprite—which she might be, in this increasingly astonishing new world.

She was on her knees beside the darkly mirrored pool, supported by the slender arms and hands that looked alabaster white against the mossy bank on which she leaned. She was smiling down at her own reflection in the water—the famous Psyche painting which Connor so well remembered, come to life!

He was afraid to breathe, much less to speak, for fear of startling her. But when she turned her head and saw him, she showed no signs of being startled. Slowly she smiled and got gracefully to her feet, the clinging white Grecian draperies that swathed her gently swaying in the breeze to outline a figure too perfect to be flesh and blood. It was accentuated by the silver cord that crossed beneath her breasts, as sparkling as her ink-black hair.

But as she smiled at Connor, instantly in the depths of her sea-green eyes he saw no fear of him; only mockery.

"I did not know," she said, in a voice that held the resonance of a silvery bell, "that any Weeds ever cared so much about the beauties of Nature to penetrate so far into the forest."

"I am not a Weed," Connor promptly disclaimed, as unconsciously he took a step or two nearer her. He hoped that she would not vanish at the sound of his voice, or at his approach. I am—"

She stared at him a moment, then laughed. And the laughter, too, was mocking.

"No need to tell me," she said airily. "I know. You are the Sleeper who was recently revived, with the great tale of having slept a thousand years. As if you were an Immortal!"

In her laughter, her voice, was the lofty intimation that she, at least, believed nothing of the sort. Connor made no attempt to convince her—not then. He was too enthralled merely gazing at her.

"Are you one of the Immortals?" he asked, his own voice awed. "I have heard much of them."

"There are many things more immortal," she said, half cryptically, half mockingly, "than the human to whom has been given immortality. Such Immortals know nothing of all that was known, or guessed, by the Greeks of long, long ages past."

Again Connor stared at her. She spoke so confidently. And she looked—Could it be possible that the gods and goddesses, the sprites, of that long-dead Greek age were not legends, after all, but living entities? Could it be possible that he was gazing on one now—and that she might vanish at a touch, at a word?

She seemed real enough, though, and there was a certain imperiousness in her manner that was not his idea of

what should be the reaction of any lovely sprite straight out of the pages of mythology. None of it seemed real except her extravagant, pulse-warming beauty.

THE girl's words snapped him out of his reverie, with the confused knowledge that he was staring at her inanely as she stood there, swaying slightly, like a slender reed, while the gentle breeze whipped her white, gauzy draperies.

"Come," she said peremptorily. "Come sit beside me here. I have come to the forest to find adventure that I cannot find elsewhere in a boring world. I have not found it. Come, you shall amuse me. Sit here and tell me this story I have been hearing about your—sleep.

Half-hypnotically, Connor obeyed. Nor did he question why. It was all in a line with the rest, that he should find himself here above the sparkling dark pool, beside this woman—or girl, rather, since she could be no more than eighteen—whose beauty was starkly incredible.

The sun, filtering through the leaves, touched her mop of hair, so black that it glinted blue as it fell in waving cascades below her slender waist. Her skin, magnolia-tinted, was all the clearer because of the startling ebony of her hair. Her beauty was more than a lack of flaws; it was, in true fact, goddess-like, but sultry, flaming. Her perfect lips seemed constantly smiling, but like the smile in her emerald eyes, it seemed sardonic.

For one moment the beauty of this wood sprite, come upon so unexpectedly, swept all other thoughts from Connor's mind—even memory of Evanie. But the next moment Evanie was back, filling his thoughts as she had from the first with her cool, understandable loveliness. But even in that moment he knew that the radiant creature beside him, so different from Evanie and other Weed girls he had seen, would forever haunt him, whoever, whatever she might be—human being or wood goddess.

The girl grew impatient at his silence.

"Tell me!" she said imperiously. "I have said to you that I would be amused. Tell me—Sleeper."

"I am no Sleeper of the type of which you have customarily heard," Connor said, obedient to her command. "Whatever has come to me has been none of my own doing, nor by my wishes. It was like this. . . ."

Briefly he recited his experience, all that he knew of it, making no dramatic effort. He must have been impressive, for as he talked, he could see the incredulity and mockery pass from her sea-green eyes, to be replaced by reluctant belief, then astonishment.

"It is almost unbelievable," she said softly, when he had finished. "But I do believe you." Her marvelous eyes held a faraway expression. "If in your memory you have retained knowledge of your own ancient times, great things await you in this age to which you have come."

"But I know nothing about this age," Connor quickly complained. "I glean snatches of this and that, of some mysterious Immortals who seem to reign supreme, of many things alien to me and my understanding. But so far, I have not been able to learn much about this age. No! Nor do I even know anything of the history of the ages that have passed while I was—sleeping."

Connor's wood sprite looked hard at him for a moment, admiration for him plain in her glance. The mockery flickered a moment in her eyes, then died.

"Shall I tell you?" she asked. "We of the woods and valleys know many things. We learn as the cycles of years go by. But not always do we pass our knowledge along."

"Please!" begged Connor. "Please tell me everything. I am lost!"

SHE SEEMED a little uncertain where to begin, then suddenly started to talk as if giving an all-inclusive lesson in history from the beginning of time.

"You of the ancient world had great

cities," she said. "Today there are mighty cities, too. N'York had eight millions of people; Urbs, the great metropolis of this age, has thirty millions. But where there is now one metropolis, your world had a hundred. A marvelous age, that time of yours—but it ended. Some time in your Twentieth Century, it went out in a blaze of war."

"The Twentieth Century!" exclaimed Connor. "In my own time!"

"Yes. Your fierce, warlike nations sated their lust for battle at last in one gigantic war that spread like a cloud around the planet. They fought by sea, by land, by air, and beneath sea and land. They fought with weapons whose secrets are still lost, with strange chemistries, with diseases. Every nation was caught in the struggle; all their vast knowledge went into it, and city after giant city was destroyed by atomic bombs or annihilated by infected water supplies. Famine stalked the world, and after it swept swift pestilence.

"But, by the fiftieth year after the war, the world had reached a sort of stability. Then came barbarism. The old nations had fallen, and in their place came numberless little city-states, little farming communities each sufficient to itself, weaving its own cloth, raising its own food. And then the language began to change."

"Why?" asked Connor. "Children speak like their parents."

"Not exactly," said the wood sprite, with a slow smile. "Language evolves by laws. Here's one: consonants tend to move forward in the mouth as languages age. Take the word 'mother.' In the ancient Tokhar, it was *makar*. Then the Latin, *mater*. Then *madre*, then mother and now our modern word muvver. Do you see? K-T-D-Th-V—each sound a little advanced in the throat. The ultimate of course, is mama—pure labial sounds, which prove only that it's the oldest word in the world."

"I see," said Connor.

"Well, once it was released from the bonds of printing, language changed. It became difficult to read the old books, and then the books began to vanish. Fire gutted the abandoned cities; the robber bands that lurked there burned books by winter for warmth. Worms and decay ruined them. Precious knowledge vanished, some of it forever."

She paused a moment, watching Connor keenly. "Do you see now," she asked, "why I said greatness awaits you if you retain any of your ancient knowledge?"

"Possibly," said Connor. "But go on, please."

"Other factors, too, were at work," she said, nodding. "In the first place, a group of small city-states seems to be the best environment for genius. That was the situation in Greece during the Golden Age, in Italy during the Renaissance, and all over the world before the Second Enlightenment.

"Then too, a period of barbarism seems to act as a time of rest for humanity before a charge to new heights. The Stone Age flared suddenly into the light of Egypt, Persia decayed and Greece flowered, and the Middle Ages awoke to the glory of the Renaissance. So the Dark Centuries began to flame into the brilliant age of the Second Enlightenment, the fourth great dawn in human history.

"It began quietly enough, about two centuries after the war. A young man named John Holland drifted into the village of N'Orleans that sprawled beside the ancient city's ruins. He found the remnants of a library, and he was one of those rare ones who could read. He studied alone at first, but soon others joined him, and the Academy was born.

"The townspeople thought the students were wizards and sorcerers, but as knowledge grew the words wizard and sorcerer became synonyms for what your age called scientists."

"I see!" muttered Connor, and he was thinking of Evanie the Sorceress. "I see!"

"N'Orleans," said his own charming enlightener, "became the center of the Enlightenment, and played Athens to

the world. Holland died, but the Academy lived, and one day a young student named Teran had a vision. Some of the ancient knowledge had by now yielded its secrets, and Teran's vision was to recondition the centuries-old N'Orleans power plants and water systems—to give the city its utilities!

"That there was no power, no coal, no oil, didn't stop him. He and his group scraped and filed and welded away at the ancient machines, firmly believing that when power was needed, it would be there.

"He was right. It was the gift of an old man named Einar Olin, who had wandered over the continent seeking—and finding—the last and greatest achievement of the Ancients—atomic energy. N'Orleans became a miracle city where wheels turned and lights glowed. Across plains and mountains came hundreds just to see the Great City, and among these were three on whom history turned.

"These were sandy-haired Martin Sair, and black-haired Joaquin Smith, and his sister. Some have called her satanically beautiful. The Black Flame, they call her now—have you heard?"

CONNOR shook his head, his eyes drinking in the beauty of this woman of the woods, who fascinated him as he had never believed possible.

For a moment the mocking glint came back in the girl's eyes, then instantly it was gone as she shrugged her white shoulders and went on.

"Those three changed the whole course of history. Martin Sair turned to biology and medicine when he joined the half-monastic Academy, and his genius added the first new discovery to add to the knowledge of the Ancients. Studying evolution, experimenting with hard radiations, he found sterility, then immortality!

"Joaquin Smith found his field in the neglected social sciences, government, economics, psychology. He too had a dream—of rebuilding the old world. He was—or is—a colossal genius. He took Martin Sair's immortality and traded it for power. He graded immortality to Jorgensen for a rocket that flew on the atomic blast, to Kohlmar for a weapon, to Erden for the Erden resonator that explodes gunpowder miles away. And then he gathered his army and marched."

"War again!" Connor said tightly. "I should have thought they'd have had enough."

But the girl did not heed him. In her emerald eyes was a light as if she were seeing visions herself—visions of glorious conquest.

"N'Orleans," she said, "directly in the light of Joaquin Smith's magnetic personality, yielded gladly. Other cities yielded almost as if fascinated, while those who fought were overcome. What chance had rifle and arrow against the flying Triangles of Jorgensen, or Kohlmar's ionic beams? And Joaquin Smith himself was magnificent. Even the wives of the slain cheered him when he comforted them in that noble manner of his.

"America was conquered within sixty years. Immortality gave Smith, the Master, power, and no one save Martin Sair and those he taught has ever been able to learn its secret. Thousands have tried, many have claimed success, but the results of their failures still haunt the world.

"And—well, Joaquin Smith has his world Empire now; not America alone. He has bred out criminals and the feeble-minded, he has impressed his native English on every tongue, he has built Urbs, the vast, glittering, brilliant, wicked world capital, and there he rules with his sister, Margaret of Urbs, beside him. Yet—"

"I should think this world he conquered would worship him!" exclaimed Connor.

"Worship him!" cried the girl. "Too many hate him, in spite of all he has done, not only for this age, but for ages gone, since the Enlightenment. He—"

But Tom Connor was no longer listening. All his thoughts, his attention, his eyes that drank in her beauty, were on the girl. So lovely—and to have so much wisdom stored up in the brain beneath the sheen of that black satiny cap that was her hair. There could only be one answer to that. She must be a goddess, come to life.

He ached to touch her, to touch only the hem of her gauzy garment, but that must not be. His heart pounded at the very nearness of her, but it was with a worship that could have thrown him prostrate at her feet.

"It's all like a dream, what you've told me," he said, his voice far-away, musing. "You're a dream."

The dancing light of mockery came back into her sea-green eyes.

"Shall we leave it a dream—this meeting of ours?" she asked softly. She laid one white hand lightly on his arm and he thrilled at the touch as though an electric current had shot through him—but not a painful, annihilating one now. "Man of the Ancients," she said, "will you give me a promise?"

"Anything—anything!" Connor said eagerly.

"Then promise me you will say nothing, not even to the Weed girl who is called Evanie the Sorceress, about having seen me this morning. No slightest hint."

For a moment Connor hesitated. Would it be disloyalty to Evanie, in any way, to make that promise? He did not know. What he did know was that it fell in with his own ideas to keep this meeting a secret, like something sacred; something to hold as a memory deep within his own heart only.

"Promise?" she repeated.

Connor nodded. "I promise," he said soberly. "But tell me, will I see you again?"

Suddenly the girl leaped lightly to her feet, startled, listening, like the faun she probably was. Her astonishing emerald eyes were wide, as she poised for flight. Dimly, the entranced Connor became aware of voices back in the woods. Men were probably coming to seek him, knowing how sick he had been.

"I must flee!" the girl whispered quickly. "But Man of the Ancients, we *shall* meet again! That is my promise. Keep yours!"

And then, before he could speak, she had whirled like a butterfly in flight, and was speeding through the woods on noiseless feet. Connor caught one last glimpse of her fluttering white draperies against the brown and green of tree trunks and leaves, and then she was gone.

He passed a hand slowly before his bewildered eyes. It must be a dream! But she had promised they would meet again.

III

DAYS slipped imperceptibly by. Connor had almost regained his full strength. Time and again, whenever he could do so unobserved, he slipped away to the woods alone, but never again did he catch sight of the wood nymph who had so deeply fascinated him. Gradually he came in to persuade himself that the whole incident had been a dream. Many things as strange had happened to him since his strange awakening. Only one thing gave it the semblance of reality—the knowledge he had gleaned from the inky-haired girl of mystery, a knowledge later confirmed when he began to enter the peaceful life of the village.

Aside from Evanie, however, he had but one other close friend. He had taken at once to Jan Orm, engineer and operator of the village of Ormon's single factory on the hill.

The factory was a perpetual surprise to Connor. The incredibly versatile machines made nearly everything except the heavier mechanisms used in the fields, and these, he learned, could have been made. That was not necessary since the completed machines could as easily be transported as the steel necessary to construct them.

The atomic power amazed Tom Connor. The motors burned only water, or rather the hydrogen in it, and the energy was the product of synthesis rather than disintegration. Four hydrogen atoms, with their weight of 1.008, combined into one helium atom with a weight of 4; somewhere had disappeared the difference of .032, and this was the source of that abundant energy—matter being destroyed, weight transformed to energy.

There was a whole series of atomic furnaces too. The release of energy was a process of one degree, like radium; once started, neither temperature nor pressure could speed or slow it in the least. But the hydrogen burned steadily into helium at the uniform rate of half its mass in three hundred days.

Jan Orm was proud of the plant.

"Neat, isn't it?" he asked Connor. "One of the type called Omnifac; make anything. There's thousands of 'em about the country; practically make each town independent and self-sustaining. We don't need your ancient cumbersome railroad system to transport coal and ore."

"How about the metal you use?"

"Nor metal either," Jan said. "Just as there was a stone age, a bronze age, and an iron age, just as history calls your time the age of steel, we're in the aluminum age. And aluminum's everywhere; it's the base of all clays, almost eight per cent of the earth's crust."

"I know it's there," grunted Connor. "It used to cost too much to get it out of clay."

"Well, power costs nothing now. "Water's free." His face darkened moodily. "If we could only *control* the rate, but power comes out at always the same rate—a half period of three hundred days. If we could build rockets like the Triangles of Urbs. The natural rate is just too slow to lift its own weight; the power from a pound of water comes out too gradually to raise a one-pound mass. The Urbans know how to increase the rate, to make the water deliver half its energy in a hundred days—ten days."

"And if you could build rockets?"

"Then," said Jan, growing even moodier, "then we'd—" He paused abruptly. "We *can* detonate it," he said in a changed voice. "We *can* get all the energy in one terrific blast, but that's useless for a rocket."

"Why can't you use a firing chamber and explode say a gram of water at a time?" Connor asked. "A rapid series of little explosions should be just as effective as a continuous blast."

"My father tried that," Jan Orm said grimly. "He's buried at the bend of the river."

Later, Connor asked Evanie why Jan was so anxious to develop atom-powered rockets. The girl turned suddenly serious eyes on him, but made no direct reply.

"The Immortals guard the secret of the Triangle," was all she said. "It's a military secret."

"But what could he do with a rocket?"

She shook her glistening hair.

"Nothing, perhaps."

"Evanie," he said soberly, "I don't like to feel that you won't trust me. I know from what you've said that you're somehow opposed to the government. Well, I'll help you, if I can—but I can't if you keep me in ignorance."

The girl was silent.

"And another thing," he proceeded. "This immortality process. I've heard somebody say that the results of its failures when some tried it still haunt the world. Why, Evanie?"

Swiftly a crimson flush spread over the girl's cheeks and throat.

"Now what the devil have I said?" he cried. "Evanie, I swear I wouldn't hurt you for the world!"

"Don't," she only murmured, turning silently away.

HE, TOO, was hurt, because she was. He knew he owed his life to her for her treatments and hospitality. It disturbed him to think he knew of no way in which to repay her. But he was dubious of his ability to earn much as an engineer in this strange new world.

"I'd have to start right at the bottom," he observed ruefully to Evanie when he spoke of that later.

"In Urbs," Evanie said, "you'd be worth your weight in radium as a source of ancient knowledge. So much has been lost; so much is gone, perhaps forever. Often we have only the record of a great man's name, and no trace of his work. Of these is a man named Einstein and another named de Sitter—men acknowledged to be supreme geniuses of science even by the supreme scientists of your age. Their work is lost."

"I'm afraid it will remain lost, then," he said whimsically. "Both Einstein and de Sitter were contemporaries of mine, but I wasn't up to understanding their theories. All I know is that they dealt with space and time, and a supposed curvature of space—relatively, the theory was called."

"But that's exactly the clue they'd want in Urbs!" exclaimed Evanie, her eyes shining. "That's all they'd need. And think of what you could tell them of ancient literature! We haven't the artists and writers you had—not yet. The plays of a man named Shakespeare are still the most popular of all of the vision broadcasts. I always watch them." She looked up wistfully. "Was he also a contemporary of yours? And did you know a philosopher named Aristotle?"

Connor laughed. "I missed one by three centuries and the other by twenty-five" he chuckled.

"I'm sorry," said the girl, flushing red. "I don't know much of history."

He smiled warmly. "If I thought I could actually earn something—if I could pay you for all the trouble I've been, I'd go to this city of Urbs for a while—and then come back here. I'd like to pay you."

"Pay me?" she asked in surprise. "We don't use money here, except for taxes."

"The taxes?"

"Yes. The Urban taxes. They come each year to collect, and it must be paid in money." She frowned angrily, "I hate Urbs and all it stands for! I hate it!"

"Are the taxes so oppressively high?"

"Oppressive?" she retorted. "Any tax is oppressive. It's a difference in degree, that's all. As long as a government has the right to tax, the potential injustice is there. And what of other rights the Master arrogates to himself?" She paused as if to let the full enormity of that strike in.

"Well?" he said carelessly. "That's been a privilege granted to the heads of many governments, hasn't it?"

Her eyes blazed. "I can't understand a man who's willing to surrender his natural rights!" she flared. "Our men would die for a principle."

"But they're not doing it," observed Connor caustically.

"Because they'd be throwing their lives away uselessly. They can't fight the Master now with any chance of success. But just wait until the time comes."

"And then, I suppose, the whole world will be just one great beautiful state of anarchy."

"And isn't that an ideal worth fighting for?" asked the girl hotly. "To permit every single individual to attain his rightful liberty? To destroy every chance of injustice?"

"But—"

Connor paused, considering. Why should he be arguing like this with Evanie? He felt no allegiance to the government of Urbs; the Master meant nothing to him. The only government he could have fought for, died for, was lost a thousand years in the past. Whatever loyalty he owed in this topsy-turvy age belonged to Evanie. He grinned. "Crazy or not, Evanie," he promised, "your cause is mine!"

She softened suddenly. "Thank you, Tom," she said. Then, in lower tones, "Now you know why Jan Orm is so anxious for the secret of the rocket blast. Do you see?" Her voice dropped to a whisper. "Revolution!"

He nodded. "I guessed that. But since

you've answered one question, perhaps you'll answer my other one. What are the failures that still haunt the world, the products of the immortality treatment?"

Again that flush of unhappiness. "He meant the metamorphs," she murmured softly.

Quickly she rose and passed into the cottage.

CONNOR'S strength swiftly approached normal, and shortly little remained of that unbelievable sojourn in the grave. His month's grizzle of beard began to be irritating, and one day he asked Jan for a razor.

Jan seemed puzzled; at Connor's explanation he laughed, and produced a jar of salve that quickly dissolved the stubble, assuring Connor that the preparation would soon destroy the growth entirely.

But Evanie's reaction surprised him. She stared for a moment without recognition.

"Tom!" she cried. "You look—you look like an ancient statue!"

He did look different from the mild-featured villagers. With the beard removed, his lean face had an aura of strength and ruggedness that was quite unlike the appearance of his neighbors.

Time slipped pleasantly away. Evenings he spent talking to new friends, relating stories of his dead age, explaining the state of politics, society, and science in that forgotten time. Often Evanie joined in the conversation, though at other times she amused herself at the "vision," a device of remarkable perfection, on whose two-foot screen actors in distant cities spoke and moved with the naturalness of miniature life.

Connor himself saw "Winter's Tale" and "Henry the Eighth" given in accurate portrayal, and was once surprised to discover a familiar-seeming musical comedy, complete to scantily-clad chorus. In many ways Evanie puzzled Tom Connor. There was some mystery about her that he could not understand. Life in Ormon, it seemed to him, was essentially what it had been in his old days in St. Louis. Young men still followed immemorial routine; each evening saw them walking, sitting, talking, with girls, idling through the park-like arcades of trees, strolling along the quiet river.

But not Evanie. No youth ever climbed the hill to her cottage or sat with her at evening, except when Jan Orm occasionally came. And this seemed strange, considering the girl's loveliness. Connor couldn't remember a more attractive girl than this spirited, gentle, demure Evanie—except his girl of the woods. Not even Ruth, of the buried days of the past.

He mused over the matter until a more sensational mystery effaced it.

One morning he and Jan Orm and Evanie went hunting game up-river. Deer were fairly plentiful, and game birds, wild turkeys, and pheasants had increased until they were nearly as common as crows once had been.

The trio carried glistening bows of spring steel that flung slender steel arrows with deadly accuracy, if used properly. Connor was awkward, but Evanie and Jan Orm handled them with skill. Connor bemoaned the lack of rifles; he had been a fair marksman in the old days.

"I'd show you," he declared. "If I only had my Marlin repeater!"

"Guns aren't made any more," said Jan. "The Erden Resonator did for them; they're useless for military weapons."

"But for hunting?"

"They're banned by law. For a while after the founding of the Urban Empire people kept 'em hidden around, but no one knew when a resonator might sweep the section, and folks got tired of having the things go off at night, smashing windows and plowing walls. They weren't safe house-pets."

"Well," grumbled Connor, "I'd like one now, even an air rifle. Say!" he

exclaimed. "Why not a water-gun?"

"A water-gun?"

"One run by atomic energy. Didn't you say you could detonate it, get all the power out at once?"

"Yes, but—" Jan Orm paused. "By the gods!" he roared. "That's the answer! That's the weapon! Why didn't anybody think of that before? There's what we need to—" He broke his sentence in mid-air.

Evanie smiled. "It's all right," she said. "Tom knows."

"Yes," said Connor, "and I'm with you in your revolutionary ambitions."

"I'm glad," Jan Orm said simply. His eyes lighted. "That gun is a stroke of genius. The resonators can't damage an atom-powered rifle. Evanie, the time draws near."

The three proceeded thoughtfully up the river bank. The midsummer sun beat down upon them with withering intensity. Connor mopped his streaming brow.

"How I'd like a swim!" he ejaculated. "Evanie, do you people ever swim here? That place where the river's backed up by that fallen bridge should be a great place for a dip."

"Oh, no!" the girl said quickly. "Why should we swim? You can bathe every day in the pool at home."

That was true. The six-foot basin where water, warmed to a pleasant tepidity by atomic heat, bubbled steadily, was always available. But it was a poor substitute for swimming in open water.

"That little lake looked tempting," Connor sighed.

"The lake!" cried Evanie, in horror. "Oh, no! You can't swim there!"

"Why not?"

"You just can't!"

And that was as much information as he could obtain. Shortly afterward, swinging the half-dozen birds that had fallen to their arrows, they started back for the village.

BUT CONNOR was determined to ferret out at least that one mystery—why he should not swim in the lake. The next time he accompanied Jan Orm on a tramp up-river, he piled Jan with questions. But it was futile. He could extract no more from Jan Orm than he had from Evanie.

As the pair approached the place of the ruined bridge that dammed the stream, they turned a little way inland. Jan's keen eyes spotted a movement in a thick copse.

"Deer in there," he whispered. "Let's separate and start him."

He bore off to the left, and Connor, creeping cautiously to the right, approached the grass-grown marge of the flowage. Suddenly he stopped short. Ahead of him the sun had glinted on something large and brown and wet, and he heard a rustle of movement. He moved stealthily forward; with utmost care he separated a screen of brush, and gazed through it to a little open glade, and on the creature that sprawled there beside the water.

At first he saw only a five-foot strip of wet, hairless, oily skin that heaved to the thing's slow breathing. He held his bow ready lest it prove dangerous, and stared, wondering what sort of creature it could be. It was certainly nothing native to the North America of his day. And then, at some sound or movement of his, the beast rolled over and faced him.

Connor felt sick. He glimpsed short, incredibly thick limbs, great splay feet with webbed toes, broad hands with webbed fingers. But what sickened him was the smooth bulbous face with its tiny eyes and little round, red-lipped mouth.

The thing was—or had been—human!

Connor let out a choking yell. The creature, with a mumble that might have been speech, flopped awkwardly to the bank and into the water, where it cleaved the element like an otter and disappeared with a long, silent wake.

He heard the crashing of Jan Orm's approach, and his cry of inquiry. But a webbed print in the mud of the bank

told Jan Orm the story.

"Wh—what was it?" Connor choked.

"A metamorph," said Jan soberly.

Empty-handed as they were, he turned homeward. Connor, too aghast to press questions, followed him. And then came the second mystery.

Connor saw it first—a face, a child's face, peering at them from a leafy covert. But this was no human child. Speechless, Connor saw the small pointed twitching ears, the pointed teeth, the little black slanting eyes squinting at him beadily. The face was that of a young satyr, a child of Pan. It was the spirit of the wilderness incarnate, not evil exactly, not even savage, but just wild—wild!

The imp vanished instantly. As Connor gasped, "What's that?" it was already far beyond arrow-shot, headed for the forest. Jan viewed it without surprise.

"It's a young metamorph," he said. "A different sort than the one at the lake." He paused and stared steadily into Connor's eyes. "Promise me something," he muttered.

"What?"

"That you'll not tell Evanie you saw these things."

"If you wish," said Connor slowly. It was all beyond him.

IV

TOM CONNOR was determined now to fathom these mysteries. Jan should no longer put him off. He stopped and placed a hand firmly on Jan's arm, forced the man to look into his eyes when Jan would have evaded his gaze.

"Just what," he said bluntly, "is a metamorph? You must tell me, Jan!"

There was a moment's uncomfortable silence.

"That question has been evaded long enough," Connor said firmly, "and I intend to know why. This is my world now. I've got to live in it, and I want to know what others know of it—its

[Turn page]

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faults as well as its virtues. Why have you shunned the question?"

"Because—because—"

"Because of Evanie!" supplied Connor.

"Yes," Jan agreed, reluctantly. "Because of Evanie."

"What has that monster at the lake to do with her?"

"Nothing directly." Jan Orm paused. "Before I tell you more, Tom, I'm going to ask you something. Do you love Evanie?"

"I'm very fond of her."

"But do you love her?" Jan insisted.

"Yes," said Connor suddenly. "I do."

A swift thought had come to him before he had reached that decision. The vision of a smiling wood nymph was before his eyes. But only a human being could be loved by a man —a coolly lovely girl like Evanie; not a goddess.

"Why do the youths of Ormon ignore Evanie so, Jan?" Connor asked abruptly. "She's far the loveliest girl in town."

"So she is, Tom. It's her own doing that they ignore her. They have tried to be friends with her—have tried hard. But she—well, she has always discouraged them."

"Why?"

"Because, I think, she feels that in justice to everybody she can't marry."

"And again why?"

For a long moment Jan Orm hesitated. "I'll tell you," he decided finally. "Tom, she's one-eighth metamorph!"

"What?"

"Yes. Her mother was the daughter of Montmerci the Anadominist. A great man, but half metamorph."

"Do you mean," asked Conner, aghast, "that she has the blood of that lake monster in her?"

"No! Oh, no! There are two kinds of metamorphs. One sort, the Panate metamorph, is human; the others, the amphimorphs, are just—horrors. Evanie's blood is Panate. But she has conquered her metamorphic heredity."

"A metamorph!" Connor groaned.

The picture of that flopping horror rosé in his mind, and then the vision of the mild, impish face of the woods child. There *was* something reminiscent of Evanie in that, the color of her bronze hair, an occasional glint in her deep eyes.

"Tell me," he said huskily, "about that heredity of hers. Might her child, for instance, turn wild? Or turn into such a horror as an—amphimorph?"

Jan Orm smiled.

"By no chance! The Panate metamorphs, I tell you, are human. They're people. They're much like us—good and bad, brilliant and stupid, and many of them surpassingly beautiful in their wild way."

"But just what are they? Where'd they come from?"

"Do you remember hearing Martin Sair mentioned? He was companion of the Master. Evanie's great-uncle thirty generations removed."

"The discoverer of immortality? I remember."

But Connor made no mention of when he had first heard of both Martin Sair and the Master—from an uncannily beautiful wood sprite who had seemed to possess all the wisdom of the ages.

"Yes," Jan told him. "And you must have heard, too, that there were other attempts at making men immortal, in the first century of the Enlightenment. And failures. Some that still haunt the world. Well, the metamorphs are those failures."

"I see," said Connor slowly.

"They're a mutation, an artificial mutation," Jan explained. "When Martin Sair's discovery became known, thousands sought to imitate him. It was understood that he was working with hard radiations, but just what was a mystery —whether as hard as the cosmic rays or as soft as the harder X-rays. Nevertheless, many charlatans claimed to be able to give immortality, and there were thousands of eager victims. It was a mania, a wave of lunacy. The laboratories of the tricksters were packed.

"There were four directions of error to be made; those who had not Sair's

secret, erred in all four. People who were treated with too hard radiations died; those treated with too soft rays simply became sterile. Those treated with the right rays, but for too long a time, remained themselves unchanged, but bore amphimorphs as children; those treated for too short a time bore Panate metamorphs.

"Can you imagine the turmoil? In a world just emerging from barbarism, still disorganized, of course some of the freaks survived. Near the sea coasts amphimorphs began to appear, and in lakes and rivers; while in the hills and forests the Children of Nature, the Panate type, went trouping through the wilderness."

BUT WHY weren't they exterminated?" asked Connors tersely. "You've bred out criminals. Why let these creatures exist?"

"Criminals could be reached and sterilized. It's impossible to sterilize beings who slip into the sea at one's approach, or who fade like shadows into the depths of a forest."

"Then why not kill them off?"

"Would *you* favor such a measure?"

"No," Connor said, adding in impassioned tone, "it would be nothing less than murder, even to kill the swimmers! Are they—intelligent?"

"In a dim fashion. The amphimorphs are creatures cast back to the amphibious stage of the human embryo—just above the gilled period. The others, the Panates, are strange. Except for an odd claustrophobia—the fear of enclosed things, of houses or clothing—they're quite as intelligent as most of us. And they're comparatively harmless."

Connor heaved a sigh of relief. "Then they aren't a problem?"

"Oh, there were consequences," Jan said wryly. "Their women are often very beautiful, like the marble figures of nymphs dug up in Europe. There have been many cases like Evanie's. Many of us may have a drop or so of metamorphic blood. But it falls hardest on the first offspring, the hybrids, miserable creatures unable to endure civilized life, and often most unhappy in the wilds. Yet even these occasionally produce a genius. Evanie's grandfather is one."

"What did he do?"

"He was known as Montmerci the Anadominist, half human, half metamorph. Yet his was a powerful personality. He was strong enough to lead an abortive revolution against the Master. Both humans and metamorphs followed him. He even managed to direct a group of amphimorphs, who got into the city's water supply and erupted into the sewers by hundreds."

"But what happened to the revolution?"

"It was quickly suppressed," Jan said bitterly. "What could a horde armed with bows and knives do against the Rings and ionic beams of Urbs?"

"And Montmerci?"

"He was executed—a rare punishment. But the Master realized the danger from this wild metamorph. A second attempt might have been successful. That's why Evanie hates Urbs so intensely."

"Evanie!" Connor said musingly. "Tell me, what was it that led to her father's marrying a—a—"

"A cross? Well, Evan Sair was like Evanie, a doctor. He came upon Meria, the daughter of Montmerci, down in the mountain region called Ozarky. He found her there sick, just after the collapse of the uprising. Evan Sair cared for her and fell in love with her. He brought her here to his home, and married her, but she soon began to weaken again from lack of the open woods and sunlight.

"She died when Evanie was born, but she would have died anyway."

Jan Orm paused and drew a long breath. "Now do you see why Evanie fears her own blood? Why she has driven away the youths who tried to arouse even friendship? She's afraid of the sleeping metamorphic nature in her, and

needlessly afraid, since she's safely human. She has even tried to drive me away, but I refuse to be so driven. I understand."

"So do I," said Connor soberly. "And I'm going to marry her."

Jan Orm smiled dryly. "And if she thinks otherwise?"

"Then I must convince her."

Jan shook his head in mild wonderment. "Perhaps you can," he said, with the barest hint of reluctance. "There's something dynamic about you. In some ways you're like the Immortals of Urbs."

When they reached the village, Connor left Jan Orm and trudged in a deep reverie up Evanie's hill, musing on the curious revelations he had heard, analyzing his own feelings. Did he really love the bronze-haired Evanie? The query had never presented itself until Jan had put it to him, so bluntly, yet now he was certain he did. Admitting that, then—had he the right to ask her to marry a survival of the past, a revivified mummy, a sort of living fossil?

What damage might that millenium of sleep have done him? Might he not awake some morning to find the weight of his years suddenly upon him? Might he not disintegrate like a veritable mummy when its wrappings were removed? Still he had never felt stronger or healthier in his life. And was he such a freak, after all, in this world of Immortals, satyrs, and half-human swimmers?

He paused at the door of the cottage, peering within. The miraculous cookstove hissed quietly, and Evanie was humming to herself as she stood before a mirror, brushing the shining metal of her hair. She glimpsed him instantly and whirled. He strode forward and caught her hands.

"Evanie—" he began, and paused as she jerked violently to release herself.

"Please go out!" she said.

He held her wrists firmly. "Evanie, you've got to listen to me. I love you!"

"I know those aren't the right words," he stumbled on. "It's just—the best I can do."

"I don't—permit this," she murmured.

"I know you don't; but Evanie, I mean it!"

He tried to draw her closer but she stood stiffly while he slipped his arms about her. By sheer strength he tilted her head back and kissed her.

For a moment he felt her relax against him, then she thrust him away.

"Please!" she gasped. "You can't! You don't understand!"

"I do," he said gently.

"Then you see how impossible it is for me to—marry?"

"Any wildness in any children of ours," he said with a smile, "might as easily come of the Connor blood."

For a long moment Evanie lay passive in his arms, and then, when she struggled away, he was startled to see tears.

"Tom," she whispered, "if I say I love you will you promise me something?"

"You know I will!"

"Then promise you'll not mention love again, nor try to kiss me, nor even touch me—for a month. After that, I'll do as you wish. Do you promise?"

"Of course; but why, Evanie? Why?"

"Because within a month," she murmured tensely, "there'll be war!"

CONNOR held strictly to his word with Evanie. But the change in their relationship was apparent to both of them. Evanie no longer met his gaze with frank steadiness. Her eyes would drop when they met his, and she would lose the thread of her sentences in confusion.

Yet when he turned unexpectedly, he always found her watching him with a mixture of abstractedness and speculation. And once or twice he awakened in the morning to find her gazing at him from the doorway with a tender, wistful smile.

One afternoon Jan Orm hailed him from the foot of Evanie's hill.

"I've something to show you," he called, and Connor rose from his comfortable sprawl in the shade and joined him, walking toward the factory across

the village.

"I've been thinking, Jan," Connor remarked. "Frankly, I can't yet understand why you consider the Master such a despicable tyrant. I've yet to hear of any really tyrannous act of his."

"He isn't a tyrant," Jan said gloomily. "I wish he were. Then our revolution would be simple. Almost everybody would be on our side. It's evidence of his ability that he avoids any misgovernment, and keeps the greater part of the people satisfied. He's just, kind and benevolent—on the surface!"

"What makes you think he's different underneath?"

"He retains the one secret we'd all like to possess—the secret of immortality. Isn't that evidence enough that he's supremely selfish? He and his two or three million Immortals—sole rulers of the Earth!"

"Two or three million!"

"Yes. What's the difference how many? They're still ruling half a billion people—a small percentage ruling the many. If he's so benevolent, why doesn't he grant others the privilege of immortality?"

"That's a fair question," said Connor slowly, pondering. "Anyway, I'm on your side, Jan. You're my people now; I owe you all my allegiance." They entered the factory. "And now—what was it you brought me here to see?"

Jan's face brightened.

"Ah!" he exclaimed. "Have a look at this."

He brought forth an object from a desk drawer in his office, passing it proudly to Connor. It was a blunt, thick-handled, blue steel revolver.

"Atom-powered," Jan glowed. "Here's the magazine."

He shook a dozen little leaden balls, each the size of his little fingernail, into his palm.

"No need of a cartridge, of course," commented Connor. "Water in the handle? I thought so. But here's one mistake. You don't want your projectiles round; you lose range and accuracy. Make 'em cylindrical and blunt-pointed." He squinted through the weapon's barrel. "And—there's no rifling."

He explained the purpose of rifling the barrel to give the bullet a rotary motion.

"I might have known enough to consult you first," Jan Orm said wryly. "Want to try it out anyway? I haven't been able to hit much with it so far."

They moved through the whirring factory. At the rear the door opened upon a slope away from the village. The ground slanted gently toward the river. Glancing about for a suitable target, Connor seized an empty can from a bench within the door and flung it as far as he could down the slope. He raised the revolver, and suddenly perceived another imperfection that had escaped his notice.

"There are no sights on it!" he ejaculated.

"Sights?" Jan was puzzled.

"To aim by." He explained the principle. "Well, let's try it as is."

He squinted down the smooth barrel, squeezed the trigger. There was a sharp report, his arm snapped back to a terrific recoil, and the can leaped spinning high into the air, to fall yards farther toward the river.

"Wow!" he exclaimed. "What a kick!"

But Jan was leaping with enthusiasm.

"You hit it! You hit it!"

"Yeah, but it hit back," Connor said ruefully. "While you're making the other changes lighten the charge a little or you'll have broken wrists in your army. And I'd get somebody to work on ordnance and rifles. They're a lot more useful than revolvers." At Jan's nod, he asked, "You don't expect to equip the whole revolution with the products of this one factory, do you?"

"Of course not! There are thousands like it, in villages like Ormon. I've already sent descriptions of the weapons we'll need. I'll have to correct them."

"How many men can you count on? Altogether, I mean."

"About twenty-five thousand."

"Twenty-five thousand for a world revolution? An even twenty-five thousand to attack a city of thirty millon?"

"Don't forget that the city is all that counts. Who holds Urbs, holds the world."

"But still—a city that size! Or even just the three million Immortals. We'll be overwhelmed!"

"I don't think so," Jan said grimly. "Don't forget that in Urbs are several million Anadominists. I count on them to join us. In fact, I'm planning to smuggle arms to them, provided our weapons are successful. They won't be as effective as the ionic beam, but we can only try. We'll have at least the advantage of surprise, since we don't plan to muster and march on Urbs. We'll infiltrate slowly, and on the given day, at the given hour, we'll strike!"

"There'll be street fighting, then," Connor said. "There's nothing like machine guns for that."

"What are they?"

Jan's eyes glowed as Connor explained.

"We can manage those," he decided. "That should put us on a par with the Urban troops, so long as we remain in the city where the air forces can't help them. If only *we* had aircraft!"

"There's air planes, such as my generation used."

"Too flimsy. Useless against the fliers of Urbs. No, what we need is the secret of the rocket blast, and since that's unobtainable, we'll have to do without. We'll manage to keep our fighting in the City itself. And how we'll need you!"

CONNOR soon came to realize the truth of Jan's words. What little he knew of trajectories, velocities, and the science of ballistics was taxed to the uttermost. He was astounded to discover that calculus was a lost knowledge, and that Jan was even unacquainted with the use of logarithms and the slide rule.

Rather than plod through hours and hours of mathematical computation, it seemed to Connor the shorter method was to work out a table of logarithms to four places, and to construct a slide rule. In both of these operations Jan joined with growing enthusiasm as understanding increased.

As the preparations progressed, Connor began to notice other things the vanishing of familiar faces, the lack of youthful activities. He knew what that meant. The revolutionaries were gradually filtering into Urbs, and the day of the uprising was at hand.

How close it was, however, he never dreamed until he emerged one morning to find Evanie talking to Jan Orm, with her eyes alight. She turned eagerly to Tom, led him back into the cottage.

"Kiss me!" she whispered. "The day is here! We leave for Urbs tonight!"

All day there was a hush over the village. It was bereft of youth, girls as well as men. Only the oldsters plodded about in street and field.

Jan Orm confessed to Connor that he was not entirely pleased with all details. His estimate of the number of revolutionaries who would join him had been too high. But the infiltration into the city had been successful, and twenty-two thousand villagers lay armed and hidden among their Urban sympathizers. This, Jan argued, promised a great accession to their ranks once the hour had struck.

"What are your arrangements?" Connor asked.

"Each village has chosen its leader. These leaders have again centralized their command into ten, of whom our Ormon leader happens to be one. But each variety of Weed has its own corps." He smiled. "They call us Weeds, because we're supposed to run wild."

And again there came to Connor a quick mental picture of his beautiful girl of the forest. She, too, had spoken of "Weeds," a little contemptuously, he remembered now. He had not understood her allusion then, had not asked her to explain. But it was plain enough now. Her lofty attitude toward "Weeds," or the common people, must have been because she was an aristocrat herself.

Who could she have been? He had seen no one hereabouts bearing any faintest resemblance to her.

He brought his mind swiftly back to Jan.

"If you win," he observed, "you'll have a general battle over the spoils. You may find yourself worse off after the revolution than before."

"We know that," Jan said grimly. "Yet we'll fight side by side until the Master's done for. Afterward—" He spread his hands expressively.

"You mentioned 'our Ormon leader'," remarked Connor. "That's you, of course."

"Oh, no!" Jan chuckled. "That's Evanie."

"The devil!" Connor stared amazed at the gentle, shy, quiet girl.

"Jan exaggerates," she said, smiling. "I depend on all the rest of you. Especially Jan—and you, Tom."

He shook his head, puzzled about this revolution—shadowy, vague, ill-planned. To assault a world ruler in a colossal city with untrained rabble using weapons unfamiliar to them! Surely the Master must know there was sedition and plotting among his people.

He was about to voice his doubts when a flash of iridescence down the sunny slope caught his eye. It seemed more like a disturbance in the air or a focus of light than a material body. It swept in wide circles as if hunting or seeking, and Connor heard its high, humming buzz. The creature, if it were a creature, was no more than eighteen inches long, and featureless save for a misty beak at the forward end.

It circled closer, and suddenly he perceived an amazing phenomenon. It was circling the three of them and, he had thought, the cottage too. Then he saw that instead of circling the building it was passing through the walls!

"Look!" he cried. "What's that?"

V

THE EFFECT on Jan and Evanie was startling. As they perceived the almost invisible thing, the girl shrieked in terror.

"Don't look at it!" Jan choked out. "Don't even think of it!"

Both of them covered their faces with their hands.

They made no attempt to flee; indeed, Connor thought confusedly, how could one hide from a thing that could pass like a phantom through rock walls? He tried to follow their example, but could not resist another peep at the mystery. It was still visible, but further off down the slope toward the river, and as he gazed, it abandoned its circling, passed like a streak of mist over the water, and vanished.

"It's gone," he said mildly. "Suppose you tell me what it was."

"It—it was a Messenger of the Master," murmured Evanie fearfully. "Jan, do you think it was for one of us? If so, that means he suspects!"

"God knows!" Jan muttered. "It looked dim to me, like a stray."

"And what," Connor demanded to know, "is a Messenger of the Master?"

"It's to carry the Master's commands," said Evanie.

"You don't say!" he snapped ironically. "I could guess that from its name. But what is it?"

"It's a mechanism of force, or so we think," said Jan. "It's— Did you ever see ball-lightning?"

Connor nodded.

"Well, there's nothing material, strictly speaking, in ball-lightning. It's a balance of electrical forces. And so are the Messengers—a structure of forces."

"But was it *alive*?"

"We believe not. Not exactly alive."

Connor groaned. "Not material, strictly speaking, and not exactly alive! In other words, a ghost."

Jan smiled nervously.

"It does sound queer. What I mean is that the Messengers are composed of forces, like ball-lightning. They're stable as long as Urbs supplies enough energy to offset the losses. They don't dis-

charge all at once like ball-lightning. When their energy is cut off, they just dissipate, fade out, vanish. That one missed its mark, it was for us."

"How do they bear the Master's commands?"

"I hope you never find out," Evanie said softly. "I was sent for once before, but that Messenger missed like this. Jan and I can close our minds to them. It takes practice to learn how."

"Well," said Connor, "if the Master suspects, you'd better change your plans. Surprise was your one advantage."

"We can't," Jan said grimly. "Our cooperating groups would split into factions in half an hour, given any excuse."

"But that might have been sent as a warning!"

"No matter. We've got to go ahead. What's more, we'd better leave now."

Jan rose abruptly and departed. A moment later Connor saw him back in a motor vehicle from the hill below the factory. And then, with no more preparation than that, they were jolting over the rutted red clay road, Jan driving, Evanie between the two men.

When they swung suddenly to a wide paved highway, the battered vehicle leaped swiftly to unexpected speed. A full hundred miles an hour, though that was not so greatly in excess of the speed of cars of Connor's own day.

Hour after hour they rushed down the endless way. They passed tree-grown ruins and little villages like Ormon, and as night fell, here and there the lights of some peaceful farm dwelling. Evanie relieved Jan, and then Connor, pleading his acquaintance with ancient automobiles, drove for a while, to the expressed admiration of the other two.

"You ancients must have been amazing!" said Jan.

"What paving is this?" asked Connor, as they darted along.

"Same stuff as our tires. Rubrum. Synthetic rubber."

"Paved by whom?"

"By Urbs," said Jan sourly. "Out of our taxes."

"Well, isn't that one answer to your objections? No taxes, no roads."

"The road through Ormon is maintained without taxes, simply by the cooperation of the people."

Connor smiled, remembering that rutted clay road.

"Is it possible to alienate any of the Master's troops?" he asked. "Trained men would help our chances."

"No," Jan said positively. "The man has a genius for loyalty. Such an attempt would be suicide."

"Humph! Do you know—the more I hear of the Master, the more I like him? I can't see why you hate him so. Apparently he's a good ruler."

"He is a good ruler, damn his clever soul! If he weren't, I told you everybody'd be on our side." Jan turned to Evanie. "See how dangerous the Master is? His charm strikes even through the words of his enemies!"

WHEN they finally stopped for refreshments, Evanie described for Connor other wonders of the Master's world empire. She told him of the hothouse cities of Antarctica under their crystal domes, and especially Austropolis, of the great mining city in the shadow of the Southern Pole, and of Nyx, lying precariously on the slopes of the volcano Erebus.

She had a wealth of detail gleaned from the vision screen, but Jan Orm had traveled there, and added terse comment. All traffic and freight came in by rocket, the Triangles of Urbs, a means too expensive for general use, but the mines produced the highly-prized metal, platinum.

Evanie spoke, too, of the "Urban pond," the new sea formed in the Sahara Desert by the blasting of a passage through the Atlas Mountains to the Mediterranean. That had made of Algeria and Tripoli fertile countries, and by the increased surface for evaporation, it had changed even the climate of the distant Arabian Desert.

And there was Eartheye on the sum-

mit of sky-piercing Everest, the great observatory whose objective mirror was a spinning pool of mercury a hundred feet across, and whose images of stellar bodies were broadcast to students around the world. In this gigantic mirror, Betelgeuse showed a measurable disc, the moon was a pitted plain thirty yards away, and even Mars glowed cryptically at a distance of only two and a half miles.

Connor learned that the red planet still held its mystery. The canals had turned out to be illusion, but the seasonal changes still argued life, and a million tiny markings hinted at some sort of civilization.

"But they've been to the moon," Evanie said, continuing the discussion as they got under way again. "There's a remnant of life there, little crystalline flowers that the great ladies of Urbs sometimes wear. Moon orchids—each one worth a fortune."

"I'd like to give you one some day," murmured Connor.

"Look, Tom!" Evanie cried sharply. "A Triangle!"

He saw it in the radiance of early dawn. It was in fact a triangle with three girders rising from its points to an apex, whence the blast struck down through the open center. At once he realized the logic of the construction, for it could neither tip nor fall while the blast was fed.

How large? He couldn't tell, since it hung at an unknown height. It seemed enormous, at least a hundred feet on a side. And then a lateral blast flared, and it moved rapidly ahead of them into the south.

"Were they watching us, do you suppose?" Evanie asked tensely. "But—of course not! I guess I'm just nervous. Look, Tom, there's Kaatskill, a suburb of the City."

The town was one of magnificent dwellings and vast lawns.

"Kaatskill!" mused Connor. "The home of Rip Van Winkle!"

Evanie did not guess his meaning.

"If he lives in Kaatskill I never heard of him," she said. "It is a place where many wealthy Sleepers have settled to enjoy their wealth."

The road widened suddenly, and then they topped the crest of a hill. Connor's eyes widened in astonishment as the scene unfolded.

A valley lay before them, and cupped in the hills as in the palm of a colossal hand, lay such a hive of mammoth buildings that for a moment reason refused to accept it. Urbs! Connor knew instantly that only the world capital could stretch in such reaches across to the distant blue hills beyond.

He stared at sky-piercing structures, at tiered streets, at the curious steel web where a monorail car sped like a spider along its silken strand.

"There! Urbs Minor!" whispered Evanie. "Lesser Urbs!"

"Lesser Urbs!"

"Yes. Urbs Major is beyond. See? Toward the hills."

He saw. He saw the incredible structures that loomed Gargantuan. He saw a fleecy cloud drift across one, while behind it twin towers struck yet higher toward the heavens.

"The spires of the Palace," murmured Evanie.

They sped along the topmost of three tiers, and the vast structures were blotted out by nearer ones. For an hour and a half they passed along that seemingly endless street. The morning life of Urbs was appearing, traffic flowed, pedestrians moved in and out of doorways.

The dress of the city had something military about it, with men and women alike garbed in metallic-scaled shirts and either kirtles or brief shorts, with sandaled feet. They were slight in build, as were the Ormon folk, but they had none of the easy-going complacency of the villagers. They were hectic and hurried, and the sight struck a familiar note across the centuries.

Urbs was City incarnate. Connor felt the brilliance, the glamour, the wickedness, that is a part of all great cities

from Babylon to Chicago. Here were all of them in one, all the great cities that ever were, all in this gigantic metropolis. Babylon reborn—Imperial Rome made young again!

They crossed, suddenly, a three-tiered viaduct over brown water.

"The canal that makes Urbs a seaport," Evanie explained.

Beyond, rising cliff-like from the bank, soared those structural clossi Connor had seen in the blue distance, towering unbelievably into the bright sky. He felt like a pygmy, crushed and stifled, so enormous was the mass. He did not need Evanie's whisper:

"Across the water is Greater Urbs."

Those mountainous piles could be nothing less.

On the crowded sidewalks brilliant-costumed people flowed by, many smoking black cigarettes. That roused a longing in Tom Connor for his ancient pipe, now disintegrated a thousand years. He stared at the bold Urban women with their short hair and metallic garb. Now and again one stared back, either contemptuously, noting his Weed clothing, or in admiration of his strong figure.

Jan Orm guided the car down a long ramp, past the second tier and down into the dusk of the ground level. They cut into a solid line of thunderous trucks, and finally pulled up at the base of one of the giant buildings. Jan drew a deep sigh.

"We're here," he said. "Urbs!"

Connor made no reply. In his mind was only the stunning thought that this colossus called Urbs was the city they were to attempt to conquer with their Weed army—a handful of less than twenty-five thousand!

WITH the cessation of the car's movement a blanket of humid heat closed down on them. The ground level was sultry, hot with the stagnant breath of thirty million pairs of lungs.

Then, as Connor alighted, there was a whir, and he glanced up to see a fan blower dissolve into whirling invisibility, drawing up the fetid accumulation of air. A faint coolness wafted along the tunnel-like street. For perhaps half a minute the fan hummed, then was stilled. The colossal city breathed in thirty-second gasps.

They moved into the building, to a temperature almost chilly after the furnace heat outside. Connor heard the hiss of a cooling system, recognized the sibilance since he had heard it from a similar system in Evanie's cottage. They followed Jan to an elevator, one of a bank of about forty, and identical to one of the automatic lifts in an ancient apartment building.

Jan pressed a button, and the cage shot into swift and silent motion. It seemed a long time before it clicked to a halt at the seventy-fourth floor. The doors swung noiselessly aside and they emerged into a carpeted hall, following Jan to a door halfway down the corridor. A faint murmur of voices within ceased as Jan pressed a bell-push.

In the moment of silence a faint, bluish light outlined the faces of Jan and Evanie; Connor, standing a bit to the side, was beyond it.

"Looking us over on a vision screen," whispered Jan, and instantly the door opened. Connor heard voices.

"Evanie Sair and Jan Orm! At last!"

Connor followed them into a small chamber, and was a little taken aback by the hush that greeted his appearance. He faced the group of leaders in the room, half a dozen men and an equal number of women, all garbed in Urban dress, and all frozen in immobile surprise.

"This is Tom Connor," Jan Orm said quickly. "He suggested the rifles."

"Well!" drawled a golden-haired girl, relaxing. "He looks like a cool Immortal Lord! I thought we were in for it!"

"You'd manage, Ena," said a striking dark-haired beauty, laughing disdainfully.

"Don't mind Maris." The blonde smiled at Connor. "She's been told she looks like the Princess; hence the air of

hauteur." She paused. "And what do you think of Urbs?"

"Crowded," Connor said, and grinned.

"Crowded! You should see it on a business day."

"It's their weekly-holiday," explained Evanie. "Sunday. We chose it purposely. There'll be fewer guards in the Palace seeing-room."

For the first time Connor realized that Sundays passed unobserved in the peaceful life of Ormon.

Jan was surveying the Urban costumes in grim disapproval.

"Let's get to business," he said shortly.

There was a chorus of "Hush!"

The girl Maris added, "You know there's a scanner in every room in Urbs, Jan. We can be seen from the Palace, and heard too!"

She nodded toward one of the light-brackets on the wall. After a moment of close inspection Connor distinguished the tiny crystal "eye."

"Why not cover it?" he asked in a low voice.

"That would bring a Palace officer in five minutes," responded the blonde, Ena. "A blank on the screen sticks out like the Alpha Building."

She summoned the group close about her, slipping a casual arm through Connor's. In an almost inaudible whisper she began to detail the progress of the plans, replying to Jan's queries about the distribution of weapons and where they now were to Evanie's question about the appointed time, to inquiries from each of the others.

Evanie's report of the Messenger caused some apprehension.

"Do you think he knows?" asked Ena. "He must, unless it was some stray that passed near you."

"Suppose he does," countered Evanie. "He can't know when. We're ready, aren't we? Why not strike today—now—at once?"

There was a chorus of whispered protest.

"We oughtn't to risk everything on a sudden decision—it's too reckless!"

Ena pressed Connor's arm and whispered, "What do *you* think?"

He caught an angry glance from Evanie. She resented the blonde girl's obvious attention.

"Evanie's right," he murmured. "The only chance this half-baked revolution has is surprise. Lose that and you've lost everything."

And such, after more whispered discussion, was the decision. The blow was to be struck at one o'clock, just two hours away. The leaders departed to pass the instructions to their subordinate leaders, until only Connor and Evanie remained. Even Jan Orm had gone to warn the men of Ormon.

EVANIE seemed about to speak to Connor, but suddenly turned her back on him.

"What's the matter, Evanie?" he said softly.

He was unprepared for the violence with which she swung around, her brown eyes blazing.

"Matter!" she snapped. "You dare ask! With the feel of that canary-headed Ena's fingers still warm on your arm!"

"But Evanie" he protested. "I did nothing."

"You let her!"

"But "

"You let her!"

Further protest was prevented by the return of the patrician Maris. Evanie dropped into a sulky silence, until shortly Jan Orm appeared.

It was a solemn group that emerged on the ground level and turned their steps in the direction of the twin-towered Palace. Evanie had apparently forgotten her grievance in the importance of the impending moment, but all were silent and thoughtful.

Not even Connor had eyes for Palace Avenue, and the tumult and turmoil of that great street boiled about him unnoticed. Through the girders above, the traffic of the second and third tiers sent rumbling thunder, but he never glanced

up, trudging abstractedly beside Evanie.

A hundred feet from the street's end they paused. Through the tunnel-like opening where Palace Avenue divided to circle the broad grounds of the Palace, Connor gazed at a vista of green lawn surmounted by the flight of white steps that led to the Arch where the enormous diorite statue of Holland, the Father of Knowledge, sat peering with narrowed eyes into an ancient volume.

"Two minutes," said Jan with a nervouse glance around. "We'd better move forward."

They reached the open. The grounds, surrounded by the incredible wall of mountainous buildings, glowed green as a lake in the sun, and the full vastness of the Palace burst upon Connor's eyes, towering into the heavens like a twin-peaked mountain. For a moment he gazed, awe-struck; then he glanced back into the cave of the ground level, waiting for the hour to strike.

It came, booming out of the Palace tower. One o'clock! Instantly the ground level was a teeming mass of humanity, swarming out of the buildings in a torrent. Sunlight glanced, flashing from rifle barrels; shouts sounded in a wild chorus. Swiftly the Ormon men gathered around Evanie, whose brilliant costume of green and crimson formed a rallying point like a flag.

The mob became an army, each group falling into formation about its leader. Men ran shouting into the streets on the broad avenue that circled the grounds, on the second and third tiers. Instantly a traffic jam began to spread to epic proportions. And then, between the vehicles, the mass of humanity flowed across the street toward the Palace.

From other streets to right and left, other crowds were pouring. The black-haired Maris was striding, bare-limbed and lithe, before her forces. White, frightened faces stared from a thousand stalled cars.

Then the heterogeneous mob was sweeping up the slope of grass, a surging mass converging from every side. The Palace was surrounded, at the mercy of the mob. And then—the whole frenzied panorama froze suddenly into immobility.

From a dozen doors, and down the wide white steps came men—Urban men, with glittering metallic cuirasses and bare brown limbs. They moved deliberately, in the manner of trained troops. Quickly they formed an inner circle about the Palace, an opposing line to the menacing thousands without.

They were few compared to the revolutionary forces, yet for a tense moment the charge was halted, and the two lines glared at each other across a few hundred feet of grassy slope.

THAT moment was etched forever in Connor's mind. He seemed to see everything, with the strange clarity that excitement can lend. The glint of sunlight on steel, the vast inextricable jam of traffic, the motionless thousands on the hill, the untold thousands peering from every window in every one of the gigantic buildings, the frowning towers of the Palace. And even, on a balcony of stone far up on the left tower, two tiny shining figures surveying the scene. The three Triangles hanging motionless as clouds high in the heavens. The vast brooding figure of Holland staring unperturbed into his black stone book.

"He's warned—he's ready!" Jan muttered.

"We'll have to fire," Evanie cried.

But before her command, the sharp rattle of rifles came from far to the right. Machine-guns sputtered, and all down the widespread line puffs of steam billowed like huge white chrysanthemums, and dissipated at once.

From a thousand windows in the bank of buildings burst other momentary clouds, and the medley of shouts punctuated by staccato explosions was like a chorus of wild music.

Connor stared thunderstruck. In the opposing line not a single man had fallen! Each stood motionless as the giant statue, left arm crooked across breast,

right arm holding a glistening revolver-like weapon. Was marksmanship responsible for that—incredibly poor marksmanship?

Impossible, with that hail of bullets! Puffs of dust spurted up before the line, splintered stone flew from the walls behind. Windows crashed. But not one Urban soldier moved.

"What's wrong?" Connor yelled.

"He knew." Jan Orm panted. "He's equipped his men with Paige deflectors. He's the devil himself!"

The girl Maris leaped forward.

"Come on!" she shouted, and led the charge.

Instantly the line of Urbans raised their weapons, laying them across their bent left arms. A faint misty radiance stabbed out, a hundred brief flashes of light. The beams swept the revolutionaries. Anguished cries broke out as men spun and writhed.

Connor leaped back as a flash caught him. Sudden pain racked him as his muscles tore against each other in violent spasmodic contractions. A moment only; then he was trembling and aching as the beam flicked out. An electric shock! None should know better than he!

Everywhere the revolutionaries were writhing in agony. The front ranks were down, and of all those near him, only he and Evanie were standing. Her face was strained and white and agonized.

Jan Orm was struggling to his feet, his face a mask of pain. Beyond him others were crawling away. Connor was astounded. The shock had been painful, but not that painful.

Halfway up the slope before the immobile line of Urbans lay the black-haired Maris. Her nerves had been unequal to the task set them, and she had fainted from sheer pain. The whole mass of the Weed army was wavering. The revolution was failing!

VI

CONNOR had an inspiration. The deflecting force must emanate from the glittering buttons on the Urban's left arms. Moreover, the field must be projected only *before* the Urban soldiers, else they'd not be able to move their own weapons. Springing to a fallen machine-gun, he righted it, spun it far to the left so as to enfilade the Urbans, to strike them from the side.

He pulled the trigger—let out a yell of fierce joy as a dozen foemen toppled. He tried to shout his discovery to the others, but none heeded, and anyhow the Urbans could counter it by a slight shift of formation. So grimly he cut as wide a gap as he could.

The beams flashed. Steeling himself to the agony of the shock, he bore it unflinching. When it had passed, the Weed army was in flight. He muttered a vicious curse and jerked a groaning man on the ground beside him to his feet.

"You're still alive, you sheep!" he snarled. "Get up and carry that girl!" He gestured at the prostrate Maris.

The slope was clearing. Only half a hundred Weeds lay twisting on the grass, or were staggering painfully erect. Connor glared at the slowly advancing Urbans, faced them for a moment disdainfully, then turned to follow the flying Weeds. Halfway across the grounds he paused, seized an abandoned rifle, and dropped to his knee.

In a gesture of utter defiance, he took careful aim at the two figures on the tower balcony five hundred feet above. He pressed the trigger. Ten shots spat out in quick succession. Windows splintered above the figures, below, to right and left. Tom Connor swore again as he realized that these, too, were protected. Then he gritted his teeth as the ionic beam swept him once more.

When it ceased, he fled, to mingle with the last of the retreating Weed forces. They were trickling through, over, and around that traffic jam that would take heroic efforts to untangle.

The Revolution was over. No man could reorganize that flying mob. Connor thrust his way through the mass of panic-stricken humanity until he

reached the car in which Jan and Evanie were already waiting.

Without a word Jan swung the car hastily about, for the traffic snarl was reaching even as far away as he had parked. Evanie dropped her head on Connor's shoulder, weeping quietly.

"That's a hell of a revolution!" he grunted. "Twenty minutes and it's over!"

The car swept through the semi-dusk of the ground level of Palace Avenue to the point where the ramp curved about the base of the Atlas Building. There Jan guided it into the sunlight of the upper tier. In the afternoon glare his face was worn and haggard. Evanie, her spell of weeping over, was pallid and expressionless, like a statue in ivory.

"Won't we be stopped?" Connor asked, as Jan put on speed.

"They'll try," said Jan. "They'll block all of the Hundred Bridges. I hope we get across first. We can only hope, because they can see every move we make, of course. There are scanners on every street. We may be watched from the Palace now."

The bridge over which they had come into the city loomed before them. In a moment they were over the canal and into Urbs Minor, where ten million people still moved about their occupations in utter ignorance of the revolution and its outcome.

The colossal buildings of Greater Urbs receded and took on the blue hue of distance, and Lesser Urbs slipped rapidly by them. It was not until they had surmounted the ridge and dropped into Kaatskill that Jan gave any evidence of relaxing. There he drew a deep breath.

"Respite!" he murmured gloomily. "There are no scanners here, at least."

"What's to be done now?" asked Connor.

"Heaven knows! We'll be hunted, of course—everybody who was in it. But in Montmerci's rebellion the Master punished only one— Montmerci himself, the leader."

"Evanie's grandfather."

"Yes. That may weigh against her."

"This damned revolution was doomed from the start!" declared Connor irritably. "We hadn't enough organization, nor good enough weapons, nor an effective plan—nothing! And having lost the advantage of surprise, we had no chance at all."

"Don't!" Evanie murmured wearily. "We know that now."

"I knew it the whole time," he retorted. "By the way, Jan those Paige deflectors of theirs. Do you know how they work?"

"Of course." Jan's voice was as weary as Evanie's. "It's just an inductive field. And metal passing through it has eddy currents induced in it."

Simple enough, mused Connor. He'd seen the old experiment of the aluminum ring tossed by eddy currents from the pole of an alternating current magnet. But he asked in surprise:

"Against such velocities?"

"Yes. The greater the velocity, the stronger the eddy currents. The bullet's speed helps to deflect it."

"Did you know of these deflectors before?" snapped Connor.

"Of course. But projectile weapons haven't been used for so long—how could I dream he'd know of our rifles and resurrect the deflectors?"

"You should have anticipated the possibility. Why, we could have used—" He broke off. Recriminations were useless now. "Never mind. Tell me about the ionic beam, Jan."

"It's just two parallel beams of highly actinic light, like gamma rays. They ionize the air they pass through. The ionized air is a conductor. There's an atomic generator in the handles of the beam-pistols, and it shoots an electric charge along the beams. And when your body closes the circuit between them—Lord! They didn't use a killing potential, or we'd have been burned to a crisp. I still ache from that agony!"

"Evanie stood up to it," Connor remarked.

"Just once," murmured the girl. "A

second time— Oh, I'd have died!"

IT STRUCK Connor that this delicate, small-boned, nervous race must be more sensitive, less inured to pain, than himself. *He* had stood the shock with little difficulty.

"You're lucky you wern't touched," said Jan.

Connor snorted. "I was touched three times—the third time by ten beams! If you'd listened to me we could have won the dog-fight anyway. I blew a dozen Urbans down by firing from the side."

"You *what?*"

"I saw that," said Evanie. "Just before the second beam. But I—I couldn't stand any more."

"It makes our position worse, I suppose," muttered Jan. "The Master will be angry at injury to his men."

Connor gave it up. Jan's regret that the enemy had suffered damage simply capped a long overdue climax. He was loath to blame Jan, or the whole Weed army, for flying from the searing touch of the ionic beams. He felt himself an unfair judge, since he couldn't feel with their nerves. More than likely what was merely painful to his more rugged body was unbearable agony to them.

What did trouble him was the realization that he failed to understand these people, failed to comprehend their viewpoint. This whole mess of a revolution seemed ill-planned, futile, unnecessary, even stupid.

This set him to wondering about Evanie. Was it fair to try to bring love into her life, to rouse her from the reserve she had cast about herself? Might that not threaten unhappiness to both of them—these two strangers from different ages?

Humanity had changed during his long sleep; the only personality in this world with whom he felt the slightest sympathy was—the Master!

A man he had never even seen, unless one of the two shining figures on the tower had been he. Like himself, the Master was a survival of an earlier time. Therein, perhaps, lay the bond.

His musings were interrupted by a flash of iridescence in the air ahead. There was a long, desolate silence as the car sped onward.

"Well," Jan Orm at last said gloomily, "it's come."

But Connor already knew, instinctively, that what he had seen was the rainbow glint of one of the Master's messengers.

"For which of us, do you suppose?" he asked soberly.

"For Evanie, I guess. But don't watch it—don't think of it. It might be for you."

Evanie was lying back in the seat, eyes shut, features blank. She had closed her mind to the unholy thing. But Connor was unable to keep either mind or eyes from the circling mystery as it swept silently about the speeding car.

"It's closing in," he whispered to Jan.

Jan reached a sudden decision. A rutted road branched ahead of them, and he swung the car into it, boring toward the hills.

"Weed village in here," he muttered. "Perhaps we can lose it there."

"How? It can pass through brick walls."

"I know, but the pneumatic freight tube goes through here. The tube's fast as a scared meteor. We can try it, and—" He paused grimly.

The sun was low in the west when they came to the village, a tiny place nestled among green hills. The ominous circling thing was glowing faintly in the dusk, now no more than twenty yards away. Evanie had kept to her resolute silence, never glancing at the threatening mystery.

In the village, Jan talked to an ancient, bearded individual, and returned to the car with a frown.

"He has only two cylinders," he announced. "You and Evanie are going."

Connor clambered out of the car.

"See here!" he whispered. "You're in more danger than I. Leave me with the car. I can find my way to Ormon."

Jan shook his head. "Listen a moment," he said firmly. "Understand what I'm saying. I love Evanie. I've always loved her, but it's you that's been given to waken her. You must go with her. And for God's sake—quickly!"

Reluctantly Connor and Evanie followed Jan into a stone building where the nervous old man stood above two seven-foot cylinders lying on a little track. Without a word the girl clambered into the first, lying flat on her face with her tiny sandals pressed against the rear.

The ancient snapped down the cover like a coffin lid. Connor's heart sank as the man shoved the metal cylinder into a round opening, closed down a door behind it, and twirled a hissing handle. Jan motioned Tom Connor to the other tube, and at that moment the flashing iridescence of the Messenger swept through the room and away. He climbed hastily in, lying as Evanie had done.

"To Ormon?" he asked.

"No. To the next Weed village, back in the mountains. Hurry!"

THE OLD MAN slammed the cover. Connor lay in utter darkness, but as he felt the cylinder slide along the track, he thought he glimpsed for a bare instant the luminous Messenger in a flash through the metal sides. He heard the faint clang of the door, and there was a brief moment of quiet.

Then, with a force that bent his knees, he felt the thrust of terrific acceleration. Only a faint rumble came to his ears, but he realized that his speed must be enormous. Then the pressure shifted. He felt his hands driven against the front, and in a few more seconds, no pressure at all.

The cover was raised. He thrust himself out, to face Evanie, just clambering from her own cylinder, and a frightened nondescript man who muttered frantically.

"Don't tell on me! Don't tell!"

He turned to listen to a low-voiced inquiry from Evanie, and answered in an inaudible whisper and a gesture to the north.

Connor followed Evanie as she hurried out of the building into darkness. He caught a faint glimpse of the stone cottages of a village smaller than Ormon, and then they were trudging over a dim trail toward the hills black against the stars.

"To the metamorphs of the hills," Evanie said mechanically. "They'll hide us until it's safe." She added wearily, "I'm so tired!"

That was not surprising, after such a day. She started to speak. "You've been— Oh!"

He saw it too. The luminous, needle-beaked shape that was the Messenger, circling them still twenty yards away.

"Lord!" he whispered. "How fast can that thing travel?"

"Disembodied electric force?" she asked wearily. "As fast as light, I suppose. Well—it doesn't matter. I can fight it off, if I must. But hurry!"

"God!" Connor groaned. "That persistent demon!"

His voice rose in a yell of surprise and fear. The misty thing had stopped in mid air, poised a moment, then launched itself at his head!

There was no pain, just a brief buzzing. Connor realized that the needlebeak had thrust itself into his skull, and the horror rested above his shoulder. He beat at it. His hands passed through it like mist. And then, in a squeaky little voice that clicked maddeningly within his very brain, came the words of the Messenger.

"Go back to Urbs!" it clicked. "Go back to Urbs!" Over and over. "Go back to Urbs!" Just that.

He turned frantic eyes on Evanie's startled face.

"Get it off!" he cried. "Get it off!"

"It was for you!" she whispered, stricken. "Oh, if it had only been for me! I can fight it. 'Close your mind to it, Tom. Try! Please try!"

He did try, over and over. But that maddening, clicking voice burned

through his efforts: "Go back to Urbs! Go back to Urbs!"

"I can't stand it!" Connor cried frantically. "It tickles—inside my brain!" He paced back and forth in anguish. "I want to run! To walk until I'm exhausted. I can't—stand—it!"

"Yes!" Evanie said. "Walk until you're exhausted. It will give us time that way. But walk north—away from Urbs. Come."

She turned wearily to join him.

"Stay here," he said. "I'll walk alone. Not far. I'll soon return."

He rushed off into the darkness. His thoughts were turmoil as he dashed down the dim trail. I'll fight it off—*Go back to Urbs!*—I won't listen—*Go back to Urbs!*—If Evanie can, so can I. I'm a man, stronger than she—*Go back to Urbs! Go back to Urbs!*

CLICKING — tickling — maddening! He rushed blindly on, tripping over branches, crashing into trees. He scrambled up the slope of a steep hill, driving himself, trying to exhaust himself until he could attain the forgetfulness of sleep.

Panting, scratched, weary, he paused from sheer necessity on the crest of the hill. The horror on his shoulder, clicking its message in his brain, gave him no surcease. He was going mad! Better death at the Master's hands than this. Better anything than this. He turned about and plunged toward the hill from which he had come. With his first step south, the maddening voice ceased.

He walked on in a relieved daze. Not even the dim mist of the Messenger on his shoulder detracted from the sheer ecstasy of stillness. He murmured meaningless words of gratitude, felt an impulse to shout a song.

Evanie, resting on a fallen log, glanced up at him as he approached.

"I'm going back to Urbs!" he cried wildly. "I can't stand this!"

"You can't! I won't let you! Please—I can rid you of it, given time. Give me a little time, Tom. Fight it!"

"I won't fight it! I'm going back!"

He turned frantically to rush on south, in any direction that would silence that clicking, tickling voice of torment.

"Go back to Urbs!" it ticked. "Go back to Urbs!"

Evanie seized his arm.

"Please—please, Tom!"

He tugged away and spun around. What he immediately saw in the darkness halted him. In a luminous arc, not three yards distant, spun a second Messenger—and in a mad moment of perversity, he was almost glad!

"Here's one for you!" he said grimly. "Now fight it!"

The girl's face turned pale and terror stricken. "Oh, no! No!" she murmured. "I'm so tired—so tired!" She turned frightened brown eyes on him. "Then stay, Tom. Don't distract me now. I need —all my strength."

It was too late. The second horror had poised itself and struck, glowing mistily against Evanie's soft bronze hair.

She stood frozen, only a low moan of anguish twisting her lips.

Connor felt a surge of sympathy that not even the insanity-breeding Messenger could overcome.

"Evanie!" he cried huskily. "Oh, my God! What is it saying?"

Her eyes were wide and terrified.

"It says 'Sleep—Sleep!' It says 'The world grows dark—your eyes are closing.' " She clenched her fists in frenzy. "It isn't fair! I could fight it off—I could fight both of them off, given time! The Master—the Master wants me—unable —to help you."

Her eyes grew misty.

Suddenly she collapsed at his feet.

For a long minute Connor stared down at her. Then he bent over, gathered her in his arms, and moved out into the darkness toward Urbs.

Evanie was a light burden, but that first mile down the mountain was a torment that was burned into Connor's memory forever. The Messenger was still as he began the return, and he managed well enough by the starlight to fol=

low the trail. But a thousand feet of mountain unevenness and inequalities of footing just about exhausted him.

HIS BREATH shortened to painful gasps, and his whole body, worn out after two nights of sleeplessness, protested with aches and twinges. At last, still cradling Evanie in his arms, he sank exhausted on the moss-covered bole of a fallen tree that glowed with misty fox-fire.

Instantly the Messenger took up its distractingly irritating admonition.

"Go back to Urbs!" it clicked deep in his brain. "Go back to Urbs! Go back to Urbs!"

He bore the torment for five minutes before he rose in wild obedience and staggered south with his burden.

But another quarter mile found him reeling and dizzy with exhaustion, lurching into trees and bushes, scratched, torn, and ragged. Once Evanie's hair caught in the thorns of some shadowy shrub and when he paused to disentangle it, the Messenger took up its maddening refrain. He tore the girl loose with a desperately convulsive gesture and blundered on along the trail.

He was on the verge of collapse after a single mile, and Urbs lay—God only knew how far south. He shifted Evanie from his arms to his shoulder, but the thought of abandoning her never entered his mind.

But the time came when his wearied body could go no further. Letting Evanie's limp body slide to the ground he closed his eyes in agony as the torturing voice of the Messenger resumed as he dropped beside her.

"I can't!" he croaked as though the Messenger or its distant controller could hear him. "Do you want to kill me?"

The sublimity of relief! The voice was still, and he relaxed in an ecstasy of rest. He realized to the full the sweetness of simple silence, the absolute perfection of merely being quiet.

He sighed, drawing in great breaths to fill his straining lungs.

He slumped full length to the ground, then, and in a moment was sleeping as profoundly as Evanie herself.

When Tom Connor awoke to broad day a heap of fruit and a shallow wooden bowl of water were beside him. Connor guessed that they had been placed there by the metamorphs that roamed the hills.

They were still loyal to Evanie, watching out for her.

He ate hungrily, then lifted Evanie's bronze head, tilting the water against her lips. She choked, swallowed a mouthful or two, but moved no more than that.

The damage to his clothing from his plunge through the darkness was slight.

His shirt was torn at sleeves and shoulder, and his trousers were ripped in several places. Evanie's soft hair was tangled with twigs and burrs, and a thorn had scratched her cheek. The elastic that bound her trouser leg to her left ankle was broken, and the garment flapped loosely. The bared ankle was crossed by a reddened gash.

He poured what remained of the water over the wound to wash away any dirt or foreign substance that might be in it. That was all his surgery encompassed.

VII

BY DAYLIGHT the Messenger was only a blur, visible out of the corner of his eye like a tear in the eye itself. The demon on Evanie's shoulder was a shifting iridescence no more solid than the heat-waves above a summer road. He stared compassionately down on the still, white face of the girl, and it was at that moment that the Messenger took up its inexorable, clicking chant: "Go back to Urbs! Go back to Urbs!"

He sighed, lifted the girl in arms still aching, and took up his laborious journey. Yard by yard he trudged along the uneven trail. When the blood began to pound in his ears he rested again, and the silent Messenger on his shoulder re-

mained silent. Only when his strength had returned did its voice take up the admonition.

Connor hated the Master now, hated him for these past hours of torture, and for the pallor of Evanie's cheeks, and her body limp in his arms.

The sun rose higher, struck down burning rays on his body. The perspiration that dampened his clothes was warm and sticky while he toiled along, and clammily cold while he rested. Shiny beads of it were on the brow of the unconscious girl, while his own face was covered with trickling rivulets that stung his eyes and bore salty drops to his lips. And the air was hot—hot!

Staggering south, resting, plowing on again, it was near sunset when he approached the Weed village where they had emerged from the pneumatic tube. A man digging before a cottage stared at him and fled through the door. On the steps of the building that housed the tube, half a dozen idlers moved hastily within, and he glimpsed the panic-stricken nondescript who had released him from the freight cylinder.

Connor strode wearily to the steps and deposited Evanie. He glared at the pale faces beyond the door.

"I want food," he snapped. "And wine. Do you hear? Wine!"

Someone slipped timidly past him. In a moment he was back with coarse brown bread and cold meat, and a bottle of the tart wild grape wine of the region. Connor ate silently, realizing that eyes peered at him from every window. When he had finished, he poured wine between Evanie's lips. It was the only nourishment he could give her.

"You in there!" he called. "Can any of you release us from these things?"

Evidently, that was a mistake. There was a terrified rustling within and a hurried exodus from some other door. The Messenger took up its refrain with maddening promptness. Abandoning hope of aid, once again he picked up Evanie and tramped into the darkness.

The demon on his shoulder finally let him sleep. It was just dawn when he awoke, and scarcely had he opened his eyes on this second morning of his tortuous trek when the clicking voice resumed its chant. He made no attempt to resist it, but rose and struggled on with his burden. Now he followed a clay road on which he could avoid tearing thorns and branches.

No more than a mile from the village he topped a rise to view a wide black highway, perhaps the same over which he and Jan Orm and Evanie had sped to Urbs just two days ago. He found the rubbery surface somewhat less tiring and managed a little more distance between rests. But the journey was painfully slow. Yet the Messenger never hurried him. He was permitted ample rest.

Now and again vehicles hummed past, mostly giant trucks. Occasionally a speeding machine slowed as if to stop, but one glimpse of the mistiness on his shoulder sent the driver whizzing on. No one, apparently, dared association with the bearer of that dread badge of the Master's enmity. It was with amazement, therefore, that Connor saw a truck actually stopping, and heard a cheerful invitation to "Come on in!"

HE CLAMBERED laboriously into the cab, placing Evanie on the seat beside him, holding her against him. He thanked the driver, a pleasant-featured youth, and relaxed, silent.

"Weed trouble, eh?" the driver asked. He stared at Connor's shoulder. "Say, you must be a pretty important Weed to rate a Messenger." He glanced sideward at Connor and suddenly grinned. "I know you now! You're the fellow that carried the beam when hell popped Sunday. Lord! Stood right up to the beam!" In his tone was deep admiration.

Connor said nothing.

"Well, you're in for it, all right," the youth resumed cheerfully. "You blew down some of the Master's men, and that's bad!"

"What did he do with the others?"

Connor asked gloomily. "They couldn't all get away."

"He only picked up the leaders. Nine of 'em. Vision didn't say what he did. Papers say he released some of 'em. Girl who thinks she looks like the Princess."

Maris, thought Connor. And Evanie was the tenth of the decemvirate. He himself was tossed in for good measure. Well, perhaps he might bargain for Evanie's release. After all, he had something to trade.

It was mid-afternoon before they looked down on Kaatskill, and Connor realized in astonishment the distance over which they must have flashed in the freight tube. Then he forgot all else as Urbs Minor appeared with its thousands of towers and, far across the valley, the misty peaks that were the colossus, Greater Urbs.

The truck kept to the ground level. The mighty buildings, shielded by the upper streets from sight, were less spectacular here, but their vast bases seemed to press upon the ground like a range of mountains, until Connor wondered why the solid earth did not sink beneath their weight. Millions upon millions of tons of metal and masonry—and all of it as if it rested on his own brain, so despondent did he feel.

Presently they were on Palace Avenue. Even the ground level of that mighty street was crowded. Connor already knew its almost legendary reputation. What the Via Appia was to Rome, or Broadway to America of yore, Palace Avenue now was to the world. Main street of the planet; highway of the six—no, the seven—continents. For Antarctica was an inhabited continent now.

When the unbelievably magnificent Twin Towers came into clean view the truck came to a halt. Connor climbed out and turned to pick up Evanie.

"Thanks," he said. "You made the road to hell a lot easier."

The youth grinned.

"'S nothing. Good chances, Weed. You'll need 'em!"

CONNOR turned for the long ascent to the Palace. He trudged up the interminable flight of steps, passing crowds of Urbans who stared and gave him wide passageway. He moved close under the great, brooding, diorite statue of Holland, into the north doorway of the Palace, where a guard stepped hastily aside to admit him.

Through a door to his right came the clatter and rustle of voices and machines, engaged in the business of administering a world government. To his left was a closed door, and ahead the hall debouched into a room so colossal that at first it seemed an illusion.

He strode in. Along the far wall, a thousand feet away, was a row of seats —thrones, rather—each on a dais or platform perhaps ten feet above the floor, and each apparently occupied. Perhaps fifty of them. Before the central one stood a group of people, and a few guards flanked it. Then, as he approached, he realized that all but the central throne were occupied only by images, by cleverly worked statues of bronze. No—two central thrones held living forms.

He pushed his way roughly through the knot of people, carefully deposited Evanie on the steps ascending to the seat, and glared defiantly at the Master.

For a moment, so intent was his gaze at the man he had come bitterly to hate, through all the torture of his forced trip, that he did not shift his eyes to the figure who sat beside the Master. The Princess of whom he had heard, he supposed—the beautiful, cruel Margaret of Urbs who, with her brother, ruled with an iron hand.

But he was not interested in her now. Her immortal brother claimed all his attention, all his defiance. Just for a breath, though, Connor's eyes did flicker in her direction—and instantly he stood stockstill, frozen, wondering if at last he had lost his mind. For here, before his staring eyes, was the most incredible thing he had come upon in all this incredible new world! And what held him

spellbound was not so much the utter, unbelievable, fantastic beauty of the woman—or girl—who sat upon the throne of Urbs, as was the fact that he *knew* her! Gazing at her, frozen in utter surprise and fascination, Tom Connor knew in that moment that the cruel Margaret of Urbs and the inky-haired, white-robed girl with whom he had spent those unforgettable moments in the wild wood outside the village of Ormon were one and the same!

There could be no possible doubt of that, though in her emerald green eyes now was no friendly light as she looked down at him haughtily, in the same manner she might show her distaste for some crawling thing that had annoyed her. But not even her changed expression, not even the rich garb that had replaced her white robe of sylvan simplicity, could alter the fact that here before Tom Connor was his woman of the woods, his girl of mystery, the girl who had unfolded to him the history of this more and more astonishing age into which Fate had drawn him.

Not by the slightest flicker of a long, black, curling eyelash did she show that she had even seen Connor before. But even in his own quick resentment that swiftly followed his frozen moment of surprise, the man from another age uncomfortably realized that her fascination for him, the sway of her bewildering beauty, was as great as it had been the first moment he had gazed upon her.

His own predicament—Evanie, everything—was forgotten, as if he were hypnotized.

Instead of a gauzy white robe that was in itself revealing, but with a touch of poetry and mysticism, she now wore the typical revealing costume of Urbs—rose bodice, and short kirtle of golden scales. And that hair of hers—never would Connor forget it—so black that it glinted blue in the light. Nor would he even forget her skin, so transparently clear, with its tint like the patina over ancient silver-bronze.

Looking at her now, Connor could see how Maris might claim a resemblance, but it was no more than the resemblance of a candle to the sun. Evanie was beautiful, too, but her loveliness was that of a human being, while the beauty of this girl who sat upon a throne was unearthly, unbelievable, immortal.

She sat with her slim legs thrust carelessly before her, her elbow on the arm of her chair, her chin in her cupped hand, and gazed indifferently from strange sea-green eyes into the vastness of the giant chamber. Never once did she glance at Connor after her first swift distasteful survey.

Her exquisite features were expressionless, or expressive only of complete boredom. Though there did seem to Connor that there was the faintest trace of that unforgettable mockery in the set of her perfect lips. Before he could tear his gaze away from her she moved slightly. With the movement something flamed on her breast—a great flower of seven petals that flashed and glistened in a dozen colors, as if made of jewels.

It took all of Connor's will power to keep his eyes from her, even though in that moment of long silence that had fallen in the throne room with his entry, he was resenting her, loathing her for what she was instead of what he had thought her to be.

Deliberately he faced the Master, head up, defiant. Let the Master—let his Princess sister—do what they pleased.

THE MAN at whom Connor stared, the man whose features he had seen before on Evanie's coin, seemed no older than the middle twenties. He was dark-eyed, and his black hair fell in a smooth helmet below his ears.

The eyes were strange, piercing, shrewd, as if they alone had aged, as if they were the receptacles of these centuries of experience. The mouth was set in a thin, cold line and yet, strangely enough, there was a humorous quirk to it. Or not so strangely, either, decided Connor. A man *must* have a sense of humor to survive seven centuries.

And then a deep, resonant voice sounded as the Master spoke.

"I see, Thomas Connor," he said ironically, "that you received my Messenger hospitably. And this is little Evanie!" His voice changed. "Good blood," he mused. "The mingling of the blood of Martin Sair with that of Montmerci."

Connor glared belligerently. "Release us from these vicious Messengers of yours, will you?" he demanded angrily. "We're here."

The Master nodded mildly, and spoke briefly into a mouthpiece on a black table beside him. There was a moment's pause, then a tingling shock as the unbound energies of the Messenger grounded through Connor's body. Evanie quivered and moaned as the thing on her shoulder vanished, but she lay as quiet as ever.

Connor shook himself. He was free! He flashed an angry frown at the impassive Master, but his eyes kept straying back to the Princess, who still had not even glanced at him after that one first instant.

"Well," said the Master quietly, "your revolution was a trifle abortive, wasn't it?"

"Up to now!" snapped Connor.

His hatred suddenly overwhelmed him. The impulse for revenge shook him bodily. Swiftly stooping, he snatched Evanie's revolver from her belt, and held the trigger while twelve shots spat full at the Master's face in a continuous steaming roar.

The steam moved lazily away. The Master sat without change of expression, uninjured, while from far above a few splinters of glass from a shattered skylight tinkled about him. Of course, Connor reflected bitterly, the man would be protected by an inductive field. Glass had been able to pass through that inductive field, where Connor's bullets could not, but their glass was a dielectric.

He cast the empty gun aside and stared sullenly at the man on the throne. Then, despite his efforts, his gaze was again drawn to the Princess.

She was no longer looking abstractedly into vacancy. At the crash of the shots she had shifted slightly, without raising her chin from her hand, and was watching him. Their glances crossed. It was like the tingle of the Messenger's discharge to him as he met the cool green eyes, inscrutable and expressionless and utterly disinterested. And in them was no slightest hint of recognition! For reasons of her own she did not mean to recognize him. Well, two could play at that game.

"Your impulses take violent form," said the Master coldly. "Why do you, who claim to be a newcomer to this age, hate me so?"

"Hate you?" Connor echoed fiercely. "Why shouldn't I? Didn't you put me through two days and nights of hell with your damned Messenger?"

"But there would have been no torment had you obeyed immediately."

"But Evanie!" Connor snapped. "See what you've done to her!"

"She was interfering. I didn't want her here, particularly, but she might have released you from the Messenger. If you'd left her to herself, I would have freed her within a few hours."

"Kind, aren't you?" sneered Connor. "You're so confident in your own powers that you don't even punish revolt. Well, you're a tyrant, nevertheless, and some day you'll get more than you bargain for. *I* could have done it myself!"

He glanced again at the Princess. Was there the faintest flicker of interest in her imperious eyes?

"And what would you have done," queried the Master amiably, "if you had been running the revolution?"

"Plenty!" retorted Connor. "In the first place, I'd never have shipped weapons into Urbs through the public tubes. You were bound to discover that, and surprise was our greatest ally. I'd have had 'em made right here, or near here. There must be Weed factories around, and if not, I'd have bought one."

"Go on," said the Master interestedly.

"What else?"

"I'd have had a real organization—not this cumbersome leader upon leader pyramid. I'd have laid real plans, planted spies in the Palace. And finally, your deflectors. I didn't know of them, or we could have won even as things were. My—associates—forgot, rather carelessly, to mention them."

The Master smiled. "That was an error. If you had known of them, what would you have done?"

"I'd have used wooden bullets instead of metal ones," said Connor boldly. "Your induction field won't stop wood. And your ionic beams—why the devil couldn't we have used metal screen armor? We could have closed the circuit with that instead of with our bodies!"

HE WAS aware, though he steadfastly refused to look at her, that the Princess was watching him now with undisguised mockery, her lovely lips parted in the ghost of a smile.

"True," said the Master with a curious expression. "You could have." He frowned. "I did not believe the stories I first heard of you—that you were a Sleeper who had awakened after a sleep of a thousand years. They were too fantastic for belief. I thought you were meaning to capitalize on the Sleep in some way known only to yourself, since I understand you had no bank deposit to draw interest for you and make you a wealthy man. Now I am inclined to believe you *have* come from another age—an age of wisdom—and you're a dangerous man, Thomas Connor. You're a brave man to bait me as you do, and a strong one, but dangerous; too dangerous. Yet I'm rather sorry your courage and strength has been bred out of the race."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to kill you," said the Master softly. "I'm sorry. Were it not for Evanie, I might be tempted to ask for your oath of allegiance and release you, but I can't trust a man who loves a Weed woman. It's a chance I dare not take, though I bitterly regret losing your blood and your ancient knowledge. If it consoles you, know that I intend to free Evanie. She's harmless to me. Any trouble she might cause can be easily handled. But you—you're different."

"Thanks," retorted Connor.

Like a compass needle his eyes did return to the face of the Princess, then. Even now, condemned to die for the second time in his strange life, he gazed fascinated at her, smiling at her with an echo of her own mockery.

"I don't suppose," said the Master hopefully, "that you'd consent to—marry Evanie, and perpetuate your blood before you die. I need that ancient strain of yours. Our race has grown weak."

"I would not!" Connor said.

"Tell me!" said the other in sudden eagerness. "Is it true, as an Ormon prisoner told us, and which I scorned to believe, having then no faith in this thousand-year Sleep, that you understand the ancient mathematics? Calculus, logarithms, and such lost branches?"

"It's quite true," snapped Connor. "Who told you?"

"Your Ormon chemist. Would you consent to impart that knowledge? The world needs it."

"For my life, perhaps."

The Master hesitated, frowning.

"I'm sorry," he said at last. "Invaluable as the knowledge is, the danger you, personally, present, outweighs it. I could trick you out of your secrets. I could promise you life, get your information, then quietly kill you. I do not stoop to that. If you desire, your knowledge goes to the grave with you."

"Thanks again," retorted Connor. "You might remember that I could have concealed my dangerous character, too. I needn't have pointed out the weakness in your defenses."

"I already knew them. I also know the weaknesses of Weed mentality." He paused. "I'm truly sorry, but—this seems to be the end of our interview." He turned as if to gesture to the guards

along the wall.

Margaret of Urbs flashed a strange, inscrutable glance at Connor, and leaned toward the Master. She spoke in low, inaudible tones, but emphatically, insistently. The Master looked up at Connor.

"I reconsider," he said coolly. "I grant you your life for the present on one condition—that you make no move against me while you are in the Palace. I do not ask your word not to escape. I only warn you that a Messenger will follow. Do you agree?"

Connor thought only a moment.

"I do."

"Then you will remain within the Palace." The Master snapped an order to a guard. "I will send doctors to attend little Evanie. That's all."

The guard, as tall a man as Connor himself, stepped forward and gathered Evanie in his arms. Connor followed him, but could not resist a backward glance at the Princess, who once more sat staring idly into space. But in his mind was the thought now, exultant in spite of his resentment, that at least she had not forgotten him, or those hours together in the woods.

They moved into the hall, and into an elevator that flashed upward with sudden and sickening acceleration. He had glimpses of floor after floor through the glass doors as they mounted high into the North Tower.

The motion ceased. Connor followed the guard into a room lit by the red glow of sunset, and watched as he deposited Evanie on a white-covered bed, then turned, and threw open a door. "That is yours," the guard said briefly, and departed.

Luxury breathed through the perfumed air of the rooms, but Connor had no time for such observations. He bent anxiously over the pallid Evanie, wondering miserably why the release of the Messenger had not awakened her. He was still gazing when a knock sounded, and two doctors entered.

One, the younger, set instantly to work examining the scratch on the girl's ankle, while the other pried open her eyes, parted her still lips, bent close to listen to her breathing.

"Brain-burnt," he announced. "Brain burnt by a vitergon—the Messenger. Severe electrolepsis."

"Lord!" Connor muttered anxiously. "Is it—is it very serious?"

"Serious? Bah!" The older man spun on him. "It's exactly what happens to Sleepers—paralysis of the pre-Rolandic areas, the will, the consciousness. Like—if I'm properly informed—what happened to you! It might be serious if we let her sleep for half a century, not otherwise." He stepped to an ebony table beside the bed, decanting a ruby liquid into a tumbler. "Here," he said. "We'll try a good stiff stimulant."

He poured the ruddy fluid between Evanie's lips, and when the last drop had vanished, stood over her watching. She moved convulsively and moaned in agony.

"Hah!" said the doctor. "That'll burn some life into her!" The girl shuddered and opened dazed and pain-racked eyes. "So! You can handle her now," he called to the younger man, and moved out of the door.

"Evanie!" murmured Connor tensely. "Are you all right?"

The dazed eyes rested on him.

"I burn! Water—oh, please—water!"

VIII

TOM CONNOR glanced a silent question at the doctor. At his nod, Connor seized the empty tumbler and looked frantically for water. He found it beyond a door, where a silent stream gushed from the mouth of a grotesque face into a broad basin.

Evanie drank eagerly, thirstily, when he brought it to her. She stared in bewilderment about the luxurious room, and turned questioning eyes on Connor.

"Where—" she began.

"In Urbs. In the Palace."

Comprehension dawned.

"The Messengers! Oh, my God!" She shivered in fright. "How long have I—"

"Just two days, Evanie. I carried you here."

"What is to be done with us?"

"I don't know, dear. But you're safe."

She frowned a moment in the effort to compose her still dazed and bewildered mind.

"Well," she murmured finally, "nothing can be done about it. I'm ashamed to have been so weak. Was he very angry?"

"He didn't seem so." The memory of the Master's impassive face rose in his mind, and with it the vision of the exquisite features of the Princess.

"I suppose the girl who sits on his right is the Princess, isn't she?" he asked. "Who is she?"

Evanie nodded. "Everyone knows that. On his left sits Martin Sair, the Giver of Life, and on his right— Why do you ask that?" She glanced up troubled, suspicious.

"Because she saved my life. She intervened for me."

"Tom!" Evanie's voice was horror-filled. "Tom, that was Margaret of Urbs, the Black Flame!" Her eyes were terrified. "Tom, she's dangerous. You mustn't even look at her. She's driven men—I don't know *how* many—to suicide. She's killed men, she's tortured them. Don't ever go near her, Tom! If she saved you, it wasn't out of mercy, because she's merciless—ruthless—utterly pitiless!"

Scarcely conscious as yet, the girl was on the verge of hysteria. Her voice grew shrill, and Connor glanced apprehensively at the young doctor's face.

Evanie turned ashen pale. "I—feel—dizzy," she choked. "I'm going to—"

The doctor sprang forward. "You mustn't!" he snapped. "We can't let her sleep again. We must walk her! Quickly!"

Between them they dragged the collapsing girl from the bed, walking her up and down the chamber. A measure of strength returned, and she walked weakly between them, back and forth. Then, abruptly, they paused at the sound of a sharp rap on the chamber door.

The doctor called out a summons. Two Urban guards in glittering metal strode through the entrance, and stood like images on either side of it. One of them intoned slowly, deep as an anthem:

"Margarita, Urbis Regina, Sororque Domini!"

The Princess! Connor and the doctor stood frozen, and even Evanie raised weary eyes as the Princess entered, striding imperiously into the room with the scaly gold of her kirtle glittering crimson in the last rays of the sun. She swept her cold eyes over the startled group, and suddenly her exquisite features flashed into a flame of anger. The glorious lips parted.

"You fool!" she spat. "You utter fool!"

Connor flushed in sudden anger, then realized that the Princess addressed, not him, but the doctor at Evanie's left, who was fear-stricken and pallid.

"You fool!" repeated Margaret of Urbs. "Walking an electroleptic! Put her to bed instantly. Let her sleep. Do you want to risk brain fever?"

THE frightened physician moved to obey, but Connor interposed.

"Wait a moment." He shot an accusing glance at the Princess. "Do you know anything about this? Are you a doctor?"

He received a cool glance from her narrowed green eyes. "Do you think," she drawled, "that I've learned nothing in seven hundred years?" And he alone caught the full implication of her words. She was subtly reminding him of how once before she had given him evidence of how vast was her knowledge. She turned imperiously. "Obey!" she snapped.

Connor stood aside as the doctor complied in panic.

"Where's Kringar?" the Princess demanded.

"Your Highness," babbled the medico,

"he gave the girl a stimulant and left. He said—"

"All right. Get out." She nodded at the impassive guards. "You, too."

The door closed behind them. Margaret of Urbs bent over Evanie, now fully conscious, but pale as death. She placed a dainty hand on the girl's forehead.

"Sleep," she said softly.

"Leave me here alone, please," Evanie begged, trembling. "I'm afraid of you. I don't trust you, and I won't sleep. I'm afraid to sleep again."

Connor stood miserably irresolute. While he hesitated, the Princess fixed her eyes on Evanie's; they glowed emerald in the evening dusk as she repeated, "Sleep!"

He saw the fear vanish from Evanie's face, leaving her features as blank as those of an image. Then she was sleeping.

The Princess faced Tom Connor across the bed. She took a black cigarette from a box on the ebony table. It glowed magically as she removed it, and she blew a plume of perfumed smoke at him.

"Worried, aren't you?" she asked mockingly.

"You know I am."

"Well, rest your mind. I mean no harm to Evanie."

"But do you know what you're doing?"

She laughed, low laughter soft as rain in a pool.

"See here," she said, still with a taunt in her eyes, "I conceived the vitergons. Martin Sair created them, but *I* conceived them. I know what harm they can do, and I know the cure for that harm. Do you trust me?"

"Not entirely."

"Well, you have small choice." She exhaled another cloud of scented smoke. "Your little Weed is safe." She moved toward the adjoining room. "There's a bath in here," she said. "Use it, and then put on some Urban clothes. I'm inclined to dine with you this evening."

He was startled. He stared back at the mocking perfection of her face, but the green eyes carried no readable expression, as she came closer.

"Why?" he asked.

"Perhaps to recall a more pleasant meeting," she said gently. "Oh, I have not forgotten you, if that is what you are thinking. I recall every word of that day in the woods, but it may be better if you forget it, publicly. Margaret of Urbs does not care to have her private business broadcast to the city. Nor is it the affair of anyone here, or any business of yours, that I choose to get away from them all occasionally, with only the birds and the trees to bear me company. You will do well to bear that in mind, Thomas Connor!"

Suddenly her voice took on a taunting note, and the mockery in the emerald eyes was plain. "Perhaps," she said, "I have another reason for commanding you to dine with me. I may want to steal your knowledge, and then kill you. I might have more than one reason for wanting to do that, but you fired a dozen shots at me on Sunday, Thomas Connor, as I stood on the balcony of the Tower. I do not fail to repay such debts.

"It will take more than you to steal what I will not give," he growled, and turned into his room, closing the door.

HE STEPPED instantly to the hall door, opened it and gazed squarely into the impassive eyes of an Urban guard standing quietly opposite. So he was being watched!

He turned back into the chamber, stripped, and entered the water of the pool, reveling in the refreshing coolness. As he bathed he could look out a window, and saw that the colossal Palace was built as a hollow square. Opposite him rose the mountainous spire of the South Tower, and far below was the wide pool and green-bordered walks of the Inner Gardens.

Drying his glowing body, he glanced distastefully at the sweat-stained pile of Weed clothing on the floor. In a closet

he found Urban dress. It gave him a queer, masquerade-like feeling to don the barbaric metal coreselet and kirtle, but the garments were cool, and befitted his great frame.

Ready at last, he flung open the door to Evanie's room.

Margaret of Urbs sat cross-legged on the bed, beside Evanie, smoking her black cigarette. Her green eyes passed appraisingly over Connor, and the glint of mockery was again in their depths.

"I always thought the ancient sculptors exaggerated their contemporaries' physiques," she said, smiling. "I was wrong. . . . But you're to kneel when you enter my presence, Thomas Connor. You didn't before."

"And I don't now. As an enemy, I owe you no such respect."

"As a gentleman you do, however. But never mind. I'm hungry. Come."

"Why can't we eat here? I don't want to leave Evanie."

"Evanie will be dull company for a dozen hours more. I'll send a maid to undress and bathe her."

"You're very considerate, aren't you?"

She laughed maliciously.

"I have no quarrel with her. But I have with you. Come!"

The glorious green eyes swept him. Both eyes and voice—a voice that now seemed to glory in malice—were so different from those of the girl of the woods that it was hard for Tom Connor to believe they were the same. But he knew they were. And now that he and she were alone every gesture seemed to admit that.

She rose without a glance at Evanie's still, white face and Connor followed her reluctantly past the guard, whose challenge she silenced with a peremptory word, and over to the bank of elevators.

"Where to?" he asked as the cage dropped swiftly.

"To a room of mine in the South Tower, I think. We'll have to go all the way down and walk across."

The cage came to sickening halt. He followed her through the vast emptiness of the room of thrones, noting curiously that both her own throne and that of the Master were now occupied by cleverly executed bronze figures. He paused to examine the effigy of the Princess, wondering how long ago it had been cast.

"Third century," she said as if in answer to his thought. "Five hundred years ago. I was a child of two hundred and twenty then—and happier." Sardonic amusement was in her face and manner. "There was no Black Flame in those days. I was the madcap Princess Peggy then, reckless and daring, but sweet and noble. Or so they thought."

"I'm sure you deserved the reputation," Connor observed acidly. He meant to follow her lead in whatever she said or did. She would have no complaint that he was the first to mention their previous meeting. If she said no more about it, it would not be mentioned at all.

She flashed her green eyes on him, eyes as icy as the green cap over Antarctica.

"I'm sure I deserve it no longer," she said in tones so cold that they startled him. "Come on."

There was something fascinating, almost hypnotic, about this weirdly beautiful being.

"I'd rather dine with your image there," he remarked dryly.

MARGARET of Urbs laughed and led Connor through a door behind the line of thrones.

"Martin Sair's laboratory," she explained, gesturing at the chaotic confusion of glassware and microscopes. "And this—" passing into a chamber beyond—"is mine."

The place seemed more like a luxurious, sumptuously furnished library than a laboratory. There were shelves upon shelves of books, hundreds of them obviously ancient, a great vision screen, a delicately inlaid desk, and here and there bits of statuary.

"Laboratory!" he echoed. "What do

you do here?"

"I think. When I want to work I use Martin's." She picked up a white carving from the desk. "See here—some of your ancient work." She added a trifle sadly, "We have no artists able to create such beauty today. It's a tragedy that the arms were broken. During the Dark Centuries, I suppose."

Connor looked at the exquisite little ivory replica of the Venus de Milo and laughed.

"Arms broken!" he scoffed. "That's a copy of an ancient Greek statue of Praxiteles. The arms were broken two thousand years before my time!"

"A copy! Where's the original? I want it!"

"It was in the Louvre, in Paris."

"Paris is in ruins. Do you know where the Louvre stood?"

"Yes."

"Then tell me! I'll have it searched for. Tell me!"

He gazed into eyes sincerely eager; the eyes now of the white-clad girl of the woods who had lolled with him on a mossy woodland bank and told him stories of the ages. That girl had loved beauty, too; had been seeking it, matching her own reflection in the black pool. It amazed him that now in her role as the frigid princess she could still be so avid for beauty.

"That's a bit of information I withhold," he said slowly, "until I can trade it for something else I may want. Evanie's safety, or my own."

The mocking light returned to her eyes. "You amuse me, Weed!" she said curtly. "But very well." She led the way to the South Tower elevators.

She was silent during the long ride to the very pinnacle of the tower. They emerged into a small chamber walled on every side in glass, and Connor stood in awe as the city spread out before them. The palace overtopped even the colossal structures around the Park. He gazed speechlessly at the mighty stretch of peaks outlined in light.

The Princess turned to a black-screened box.

"Send dinner to the tower," she ordered. "I want—oh, anything. And send Sora to the room of Evanie Sair."

She flung herself carelessly onto a purple couch along a glass wall, and Connor seated himself.

"Now," she said, "what will you take for your knowledge?"

"I won't bargain with you. I don't trust you."

She laughed.

"You see me through Evanie's eyes, Tom Connor, and once—well, once I thought you were attracted to me. But no matter. We will not again speak of that time, though it does seem odd that Fate should have had me set my Triangle down where *you* were. When I was just wandering restlessly, aimlessly, seeking peace in loveliness. . . . It's too bad you fancy yourself in love with Evanie. For I assure you she doesn't love you."

"That's not true!" he flared.

SHE laughed, and instantly her touch of wistfulness was gone, to be replaced by wickedness.

"Be careful," she mocked, "or I'll exact payment for that insult as well. But it was no lie."

He controlled his anger. "Why do you say that?"

"Because when I forced her to sleep, frightened as she was, she didn't turn to you. She fought me herself. If she had loved you, she'd have instinctively called you for help."

"I don't believe you."

"Then you're a fool," she observed indifferently, and turned from him disinterestedly at the entry of two servants bearing food.

They slipped a table between the two and served a sumptuous repast, with dishes Connor failed to recognize. He ate hungrily, but the Princess, despite her professed hunger, picked and chose and ate scarcely anything. It was a silent meal, but afterward, smoking one of the black cigarettes, he prepared to ask certain questions.

She forestalled him. With green eyes glowing sardonically, she looked straight at him.

"Why do you love Evanie instead of me?" she asked.

"You? Because you are not what I thought you were. Instead of being pure and sweet, you revel in evil. That is not hearsay; it is the historical record of your seven hundred years. For that I hate you, thoroughly and completely."

She narrowed her eyes. "Then you hate without reason," she said. "Am I not more powerful than Evanie, more intelligent, stronger, and even, I think, more beautiful?"

"You're outrageously, incredibly, fantastically beautiful!" he cried, as if the acknowledgment were wrenched from him against his will. "You're perhaps the most beautiful woman since Helen of Troy, and the most dangerous. And I hate you."

"Why?"

"Because of your lack of a little factor called character. I concede your beauty and your brilliance, but Evanie is sweet, kind, honest, and lovable. One loves character, not characteristics."

"Character!" she echoed. "You know nothing of my character. I have a hundred characters! No one can be so gentle as I—nor so cruel."

The faintest ripple of a mocking smile crossed her exquisite features, and then they were suddenly pure as an angel's. Without rising she kicked the switch of a vision screen with a dainty, sandaled toe.

"Control," she said as it glowed. A face appeared.

"A vitergon set tell to this room," she said cryptically, and then to Connor as the face vanished: "There is no scanner here. This chamber and Joaquin's in the North Tower are the only two in Urbs lacking them."

"What of it?"

"It means, Thomas Connor, that we are in utter privacy."

He frowned, puzzled. Abruptly he started back in his chair as a flash of iridescence flickered. A Messenger! And almost with his start the thing was upon him.

"Tell!" it creaked in his brain. "Tell! Tell! Tell! Tell!"

He sprang erect.

"Take it off!" he roared.

"When I have your knowledge of Venus," his tormentor said carelessly.

"Take it off, or—"

"Or what?" Her smile was guileless, sweet, innocent.

"This!" he blazed, and covered the space between them in a bound, his right hand clutching the delicate curve of her throat, his left pressing her shoulders fiercely down against the cushions.

"Take it off!" he bellowed.

SUDDENLY there was a sound behind him, the grating of doors, and he was torn away, held by four grim-faced guards. Of course! The operator of the Messenger could hear his words. He should have remembered that.

The Black Flame pushed herself to a sitting position, and her face was no angel's, but the face of a lovely demon. Green hell glittered in her eyes, but she only reached shakily for the vision switch.

"Tell Control to release," she choked huskily, and faced Tom Connor.

The Messenger tingled and vanished. The Princess rose unsteadily, but her glorious eyes burned cold as she snatched a weapon from the nearest guard.

"Get out, all of you!" she snapped.

The men backed away. Connor faced her.

"I should have killed you!" he muttered. "For humanity's sake."

"Yes, you should have, Thomas Connor." Her tones were bitter cold. "For then you would have died quickly and mercifully for murder, but now—now you die in the way I choose, and it will be neither quick nor merciful. I cannot—" her voice shook—"bear the touch of violence!" Her free hand rubbed her throat. "For this you will suffer!"

He shrugged. "It was worth it. I know your character now! I no longer have to guess."

Mockery gleamed in her eyes.

"Do you?" Her face changed suddenly, and again it was soft and pure and wistful. "Do you?" she repeated, in tones that were sad, but held that bell-like quality he so well remembered. "You don't. Do you think the Black Flame is the true Margaret of Urbs? Do you realize what immortality means?" Her exquisite face was unutterably mournful as she thrust the weapon into her belt. "You think it's a blessing, don't you? You wonder, don't you, why Joaquin has withheld it from everybody?"

"Yes, I do. I think it's tyranny. It's selfish."

"Selfish! Oh, God!" Her voice shook. "Why, he withheld it from his own mother. Blessing? It's a curse! I bear it out of my duty to Joaquin, else I'd have killed myself centuries ago. I still may, do you hear? I still may!" Her voice rose.

Appalled, he stared at her. "Why?" he cried.

"You ask why! Seven hundred years. Seven hundred years! Denied love! How do I dare love a man who ages day by day, until his teeth yellow and his hair falls out, and he's decrepit, senile, old? Denied children! Immortals can't have children. Don't you think I'd trade immortality for motherhood? Don't you?"

Connor was speechless. Her voice rose to a tense pitch.

"Do you know what seven hundred years mean? I do! It means seven centuries of friendlessness. Do you wonder that I run away to the woods sometimes, seeking the companionship, the friendship, the love, that everywhere else is denied me? How can I make friends among people who vanish like ghosts? Who among the dry scientists of the Immortals is alone—and I'm bored—bored—bored!" Her green eyes were bright with tears,but when he opened his lips to speak, she stopped him with an imperious gesture. "I'm sick to death of immortality! I want someone who loves me. Someone I'd love to grow old with, and children to grow up beside me. I want—a friend!"

She was sobbing. Impulsively he moved toward her, taking her hand.

"My God!" he choked. "I'm sorry. I didn't understand."

"And you—will help me?" Her exquisite features were pleading, tear-streaked.

"The best I can," he promised.

Her perfect lips were two rosy temptations as she drew him toward her. He bent to kiss her gently—and sprang back as if his own lips had in truth touched a flame.

Laughter! He looked into mocking eyes whose only tears were that of sardonic mirth!

"So!" she said, her red lips taunting. "There is the first taste, Thomas Connor, but there will be more before I kill you. You may go."

IX

"YOU DEVIL!" Connor gasped, and then whirled at a soft click behind him. A white envelope lay in a wire basket by the elevator.

"Hand it to me," said the Flame coolly.

He snatched it and thrust it at her, in a turmoil of emotion as he watched her read it.

"Indeed!" she murmured. "My esteemed brother orders me to keep well away from you—which I shall not do—and commands you to his quarters at once." She yawned. "Take the elevator to any floor below the Tower and ask a guard. That's all."

Yet, as the cage dropped, Connor could not forget that there had been something wistful about the Princess, at his last glimpse of her. Somehow, try as he would, he couldn't hate her quite whole-heartedly, and he frowned as he found his way to the West Chambers. A guard admitted him to an inner room and then retired quietly, leaving him

facing the Master, who sat behind a paper-littered desk.

"Well, what do you think of me?" the Master greeted him abruptly.

Connor was taken aback, unprepared for the question.

"Why," he stammered, "what would I naturally think of you? You dragged me back here by torture. You nearly killed Evanie. Do you think I can easily forget or forgive such things?"

"After all, Thomas Connor, you participated in a revolt against me," the Master said suavely. "You wounded eleven of my men. Did the governments of your day deal so leniently with treason?"

"I've wondered why you are so easy on the rebels," Connor admitted. "Frankly, in my time, there'd have been a good many of us lined up against a wall and shot."

The Master shook his head. "Why should I do that? The Weeds are the finest of my people. *I* made the only mistake—that of giving leisure to a race not ready for it. Leisure is what's bred all these minor revolutions. But does a father kill his favorite children?"

"Does a son kill his mother?" retorted Connor.

"I see my sister has been talking to you. Yes, I refused immortality to my mother. She was an old woman, ill and infirm. Should I have condemned her to added centuries of misery? Immortality does not restore youth."

The point was incontrovertible.

"Yet you withhold it from those who have youth," Connor protested. "You keep it selfishly as a reward, to bind to yourself all men of ability. You've emasculated the rest of humanity."

"You feel that immortality is a highly desirable reward, don't you?"

"I do! In spite of what your sister says."

"You don't understand," said the Master patiently. "We'll pass the question of its desirability; it doesn't matter. But suppose I were to open it to the race, to instruct all the doctors in its secrets. Wouldn't it immediately halt all development? How can evolution function if no one dies and no children are born?"

That was a puzzler.

"You could permit it after the birth of children," Connor said.

"I could. But at the present birth rate, the land areas would provide bare standing room in just a century and a half. I could then kill off nine-tenths of the population, presumably, but what of the famines and food shortages intervening?"

CONNOR was silent for a long moment.

"The fault's with immortality itself," he burst out vehemently. "Men should never have learned that secret."

"But they have learned it. Would you have me destroy the knowledge because fools envy it—and envy it mistakenly?"

"Did you summon me here merely to justify your acts?" Tom Connor snapped in reply.

"Exactly. You possess knowledge invaluable to me. I'd like to convince you of my sincerity."

"You never will."

"See here," said the Master, still in tones of calm gravity. "Don't ever doubt that I could steal your knowledge. I know ways to encompass it, and if I failed, others would not fail."

"The Princess tried that," said Connor grimly. "She will not try it again." He fingered a small bronze bust on the desk before him. "And incidentally, what's to prevent me from flinging this bronze through your skull right now—killing you, instead of waiting for you to kill me?"

"Your word to make no move against me in the Palace," reminded the Master gently.

Connor's lips tightened. In that moment he realized suddenly what it was that had perturbed him so violently. He was beginning to believe the Master, and he didn't want to! The memory of the Messenger's torture was too recent; the picture of Evanie's helplessness was

too burning. He was being won over against his will, but—

"You win," he growled, releasing the bust. "Go ahead. Tell me what all this is leading up to. You must have some objective other than the indefinite perpetuation of your own power."

The Master smiled. "I have. I plan the ultimate destiny of Mankind." He held up a hand to still Connor's quick, unbelieving protest. "Listen to me. I have bred out criminals by sterilizing, for many centuries, those with criminal tendencies. I have raised the general level of intelligence by sterilizing the feeble-minded, the incompetent. If we have fewer supreme geniuses than your people, we have at least no stupid nor insane—and genius will come.

"I try, to the best of my knowledge, to improve the race. I think I'm succeeding. At least we're far advanced over the barbarians of the Dark Centuries, and even, I believe, over the average of your mighty ancient people. I think we're happier." He paused. "Do you?"

"In a way," Connor conceded. "But even happiness isn't always a fair exchange for liberty."

"Liberty? Suppose I granted liberty? Suppose I abdicated? How long do you think it would be before every sort of Weed village was at war with every other sort? Do you want the world to break up into another welter of quarreling little nations? That's what I found; out of it I've created an empire."

He drummed a finger on the desk, thoughtfully gazing at Connor.

"Moreover, I've preserved what differences I could. The yellow race was a remnant; I've bred it strong again. The red race was gone, but the black is growing. And the tag-ends of nations—I've nourished them."

"Why?" Connor demanded. "Differences are only grounds for future trouble, aren't they?"

"Civilization grows out of differences. No race can produce a high culture by itself. There must be an exchange of ideas, and that means that there must be differences."

"You're very sure, aren't you?" Connor taunted.

"I've spent centuries thinking of it. I'm confident I've found the truth. And I do the best I can."

"I wish—" Connor paused. "I wish I could believe you!"

"You can. I never lie."

"I almost feel I can. You're not the mocking devil your sister is. I rather like you."

A queer smile flickered on the Master's lips.

"I have instructed her to cease tormenting you. I assume she has been, but she'll keep away from you hereafter. . . . Won't you, my dear?"

Connor spun around. Lounging carelessly in the far doorway, a half-smoked cigarette in her hand, was the exquisite form of Margaret of Urbs.

"Perhaps," she drawled slowly and advanced leisurely into the room, seating herself casually on the desk regardless of its litter of papers.

"Joaquin," she remarked, "this man neglects to kneel in my presence. In yours as well, I perceive. Shall I command him?"

"Try commanding the statue of Olin," snapped Connor.

"We could persuade him," insinuated the Princess. "After all, Evanie Sair is our hostage?"

"Be still!" the Master said sharply. "You know I never impose a custom on those who reject it."

The Princess turned taunting eyes on Tom Connor and was silent. "With your permission I should like to retire," he said. "We seem to have covered the ground."

"Not entirely," said the Master.

"What more do you want of me?"

"Two things. First, your knowledge. Your understanding of the ancient mathematics, and whatever else we need."

"Granted—on condition." At the Master's inquiring look he said boldly, "On condition that any knowledge I impart

be made public. You have enough secrets, though some of them are apt not to remain so!"

"I'll agree," the Master said promptly. "That was always my intention. But what secret of mine is in danger of exposure?"

Connor laughed. "What else was it you wanted of me?"

"Your blood. Your strain in the race, like an infusion of bulldog blood to give greyhounds courage. I want you to marry, and have children."

"And that," said Connor bluntly, "is my personal business. I refuse to promise that."

"Well," the Master genially remarked, "we'll let Nature take its course. I'll trade you that indulgence for the revelation of what secret you suspect."

"Done! It's the Triangle rocket-blasts."

"The rocket-blasts!"

"Yes. I've heard your craft in flight. I've listened to the blasts." He turned sardonic eyes from the Master to the Princess. "The blast isn't steady. It throbs. Do you understand? It throbs!"

The Master's face was stern. "Well?"

"I know you can't control the rate of power. You've had the whole world looking for a means of controlling the *rate*. That's impossible. Hydrogen has its natural period like radium. You can release the energy at that single rate or all at once, as in our rifles—but you can't control it otherwise!"

THERE was silence.

"I know what you do in the blast. You detonate your water—a little at a time in an enormously strong firing chamber, and release the blast gradually. It's no more continuous than the power of a gasoline engine!"

"You're endangering your life!" whispered the Master. "You can't live now!"

"With her Satanic Majesty, the Goddess of Mockery, to intercede for me?" Connor jeered, staring steadily into the gray-green eyes of the Princess. In her features now was no slightest trace of a taunt, but something more like admiration. "If I'm to die, it had better be here and now, else I'll find a way to tell what I know!"

"Here and now!" said Margaret of Urbs.

"Not yet," said the Master. "Thomas Connor, long ago, in my youth, I knew men like you. They're dead, and it's a great loss to the world. But you're living. I don't want to kill you. I'd rather trust the fate of my empire to your word. Having heard my side, then, will you swear allegiance to me?"

"No. I'm not sure of your sincerity."

"If you were, would you?"

"Gladly. I see more with you than with the Weeds."

"Then will you swear not to oppose me until such time as you are sure? And will you swear to keep that knowledge you have to yourself?"

"Fair enough!" Connor said, and grinned. He took the bronzed hand the Master extended. "I swear it." He glanced coolly at the Princess. "And by the three kinds of metamorphs, I'm glad to swear it!"

"Two kinds," corrected the Master mildly. "Panate and amphimorph."

But Margaret of Urbs caught his meaning. A faint trace of anger glinted in her eyes.

"The Immortals," she said coldly, "do not consider themselves metamorphs."

"Then I don't consider myself Irish," said Thomas Connor. "Any freak that comes out of Martin Sair's ray is a metamorph to me."

"Enough," said the Master. "That's all, Connor."

But at the door the Princess halted Connor, and he gazed down into her upturned face.

"Do you believe," she said coldly, "that Joaquin's promise will protect you—or Evanie Sair—from me? I have my own debt to collect from you."

He glanced back at the impassive figure at the desk.

"I traded my knowledge for your word," he called. "Is it good?"

"I am the Master," said that individual calmly.

Connor gazed again at the perfect features of the Flame. Slowly he raised his hand, holding her eyes with his. And then, with a sharp gesture, he snapped his finger stingingly against her dainty nose, grinned, and strode away.

At the outer door he turned. The Black Flame, her lovely face a pale mask of fury, held a beam-pistol in her hand, but she made no move as he grinned back at her. Behind her the Master smiled cryptically down at the point of his pen.

But back in his room, an amazing realization came to Connor. Under the guise of his mildness, the Master had won every single point. He had extracted from Connor the promise of secrecy concerning the Triangle blasts, his alienation from the Weed cause, and more than half an oath of allegiance to himself!

And all for what? The right of Thomas Connor to bear his own children, and the same promise of safety given at their earlier meeting!

He swore softly and lay thinking of the mocking loveliness of the Black Flame.

CONNOR awoke fully rested, with the ache from muscles strained by Evanie's weight almost vanished. He arose, bathed, donned his glittering Urban costume, and looked into Evanie's room.

The girl was awake at last, and apparently well on toward recovery. He breathed a deep sigh of relief. At least in one matter, then, the unpredictable Princess had been sincere.

"Evanie," he murmured. "Are you really all right? Are you better?"

She smiled and nodded. "I feel almost like myself."

"Well, we misjudged the Princess in one respect, then. I'll have to thank her for pulling you through."

Evanie's eyes widened in horror.

"Thank her! What do you mean? Tom did you see her while I—"

He was surprised.

"Why, I had dinner with her."

"After I warned you!" she wailed. "I tell you she's like a madness that gets into your blood. A man can't even look at her without suffering, and she's cruel and utterly inhuman." She compressed her lips firmly and whispered: "There's a scanner here—right under the light. I mustn't talk like this."

"Who cares? She won't get into my blood, Evanie. I've met only two Immortals. I like the Master. The Princess I hate!"

"See!" she whispered. "You like the Master. Tom, he's as bad as the Princess. He's subtle, scheming, insidious! His charm is poisonous. Don't let him talk you over, please!"

He was startled at her vehemence. But the Master had his word now. Could he break it? He was more than half convinced of the great ruler's sincerity. After all, Evanie was only a sweet, impulsive country girl whose grandfather had been killed. Something of his thoughts must have shown in his expression, for her face grew suddenly hard.

"If I believed you were turning away from us to them," she said tensely, "I'd despise you, Tom. But I believe in you! Believe you're strong enough to resist the trickery of the Immortals. Don't fail me."

He could not answer her then, for the maid, Sora, came in with a tray of food. She placed it on a cleverly constructed swinging arm that held it above the bed. It was a silent meal. Sora's presence put a restraint on them, and Evanie was cold, regarding Connor suspiciously.

He was relieved when they finished and the woman departed with the tray. He found a box of the magically self-lighting cigarettes, and puffed moodily, while Evanie watched him in silence.

A rap sounded. A Palace guard entered, bowed, and handed Connor a tiny package and an envelope sealed with the imprint of the Midgard Serpent, and departed.

Connor broke the seal and slipped a

card from within, read it, and whistled. There was a queer expression on his face when he handed it to Evanie. Written on it in script as fine and precise as engraving were the two sentences:

We desire your presence at once in our laboratory in the East Chambers. Show our medallion to the guard at your door.

Margarita, Urbis Regina, Sororque Domini.

The royal "we." It was no invitation, but a command. Connor stared at Evanie, who stared back with narrowed eyes.

"Well?" he said at last.

"Well?"

"What can I do? Ignore it and expose both of us to her anger if she's such a devil as you say?"

"Oh, go!" snapped Evanie. "You and your ancient strength and courage. You're like any other man before the Black Flame of Urbs—just a fool. Go!"

"And leave you?"

"I'll have Sora for company," she retorted. "Go ahead. Burn yourself at the Flame, and see if I care."

"I don't see what else I can do than go," he muttered unhappily.

He turned moodily to the door, stripping the wrapper from the tiny package. A beautifully cast golden disc lay in his hand, with the pure features of the Princess in high relief.

THE GUARD outside challenged him at once. It gave him a grim pleasure to flash the medallion in the fellow's face, to see him salute in amazement and step aside. Connor took the elevator to the ground floor, and passed moodily into the vast cavity of the Throne Room.

He passed through Martin Sair's disorderly chamber and finally to his destination. Margaret of Urbs sat with a glass of purple wine in one hand and the inevitable cigarette in the other, her dainty sandaled feet on a soft footstool. She wore Urban dress of glistening silver, above which her black hair gleamed like metal. She gave him a sardonic smile.

"You may kiss my sandal," she said.

"Or the hem of your skirt," he retorted. "Why did you send me that note?"

She gestured at the vision screen beside her.

"Mostly to watch you and Evanie quarrel over it."

"Then you know my opinion of you."

"Yes. I was rather amused."

"Well, if you've ceased to be amused, may I go back?"

"Not immediately," said the Princess. "Don't you think I owe you a little amusement in return?"

"I'll forgive the obligation."

"But I'm very circumspect about my debts," she insisted, with that maddening twinkle of mockery in the eyes that dared him. "Isn't there anything about the Palace—or in the world—that interests you? I'll take you sightseeing."

It was an opportunity, at that. There certainly was much he would like to see in this world that had grown up a thousand years after he was born. He hesitated. The inky-haired girl gestured at a chair and he sat down. Without permission he poured himself a goblet of the wine beside her. It was quite different from the still wines of Ormon; sweet, sparkling, rich—and potent.

"I'd like to see Eartheye," he said, musingly.

"Oh, Asia's too far!" she quickly protested. "I'm only giving you an hour or so."

"Let's have something on the vision screen from Eartheye, then," he suggested. "How about Mars?"

"Well, it's night over Asia." She snapped the screen on with a negligent hand and said, "Eartheye." In a moment a bearded face appeared with a respectful salute. "Put on Mars," she drawled. "The central region of Solis Lacus."

In a moment a rosy glow suffused the screen, resolving into focus as a ruddy plain with a greenish center. Connor gazed spellbound. The planet of mystery at a distance of two miles!

Enigmatical dark spots of strangely

suggestive regularity were distinguishable, a lacy tracery of cabalistic lines, the flash of something bright that might be water. A pygmy civilization? he wondered dizzily.

"I'd like to see *that* at first hand," he murmured.

"So would I," said Margaret of Urbs. "I've tried to talk my esteemed brother into permission to make the attempt, without success so far."

"You?" He remembered his conversation with Evanie and Jan Orm. "But it's two and a half years there and back!"

"What's two and a half years to me?" She snapped off the screen. "Come on," she said rising.

"Where now?"

"For a little flight. I'll show you a Triangle"—she glanced at him with a mocking smile—"since you know their secret, and yet live!"

"No thanks to you," Connor flashed at her.

"No. Were you frightened?"

"Did I seem so?"

She shook her head.

"Are you ever afraid?"

"Often. I try not to show it."

"I never am," she said, pulling a beam-pistol from a table drawer and snapping it to her waist. "Since we're leaving the Palace," she explained. "I intend to bring you back."

He laughed and followed her through the Throne Room and up to a portion of the vast Palace roof below the South Tower. A Triangle stood there on a metal flooring. He noticed the pitting and excoriations where the blast had struck. The vehicle gleamed silver, far smaller than the giant ones he had seen in flight. Connor glanced curiously at the firing chamber at the apex, then at the name "Sky-rat" engraved on the wall.

"My Sky-rat," said Margaret of Urbs. "The swiftest thing yet made by man. Your bullets are laggards beside it." She hesitated, and for a moment he could have sworn that there was a touch of shyness in her eyes. "I took one trip in this—not so long ago," she said softly, "that I will never forget. The woods of Ormon are lovely, don't you think?"

He made no answer to that, and followed her in. The tubular chamber was luxuriously fitted, with deeply cushioned seats and room enough for comfortable sleeping quarters. When they were seated she depressed a lever and the throbbing roar of the blast began.

Through the floor-port he watched the Palace drop away. Urbs Major unrolled beneath. There was a sensation of weight as the vehicle shot upward like an errant meteor.

"Frightened?" laughed the Princess.

Connor shrugged. "I've flown before," he said laconically.

"Oh—airplanes! Wait!"

X

MINUTE by minute the Earth receded. It seemed not so much to drop as to diminish, as if the surface were condensing like a deflating balloon. Urbs Minor slipped smoothly into the square of vision and the whole panorama of the mighty city was below—Greater and Lesser Urbs with the gash of the canal between them, tiny as a toy village in the Swiss Alps.

Kaatskill slid into the square, and a dozen other previously unseen suburbs of the vast metropolis. The aspiring towers of the Palace were small as pins in a carpet, and already a little east of them, as their radial flight permitted the Earth's rotation to gain on the craft.

The Earth began to seem hazy, and off to the north a snow-white plain of clouds glistened. The vast bowl of the planet began slowly to hump in the center. It was inverting, beginning to seem spherical.

Tom Connor jumped violently as a spark crackled off his thumb. A second stung the tip of his nose. The black silken hair of the Princess rose queerly in a cloud about the perfection of her face, and sparks raced along the ship's hull.

"The Heaviside ionization layer," she murmured. "Scared?"

"No."

Margaret of Urbs glanced at a dial.

"Thirty thousand now."

"Feet?"

She laughed. "Meters."

About twenty miles. And they were still accelerating. The surface below flowed continually inward. The sky darkened; a star appeared, and then another; fifty stars; a thousand—all glistening in a black sky where the sun blazed blue-white. The Earth was decidedly globular now. The vast, inconceivable slope of the planet could be seen in all directions.

Unconsciously Connor jumped as suddenly there came a sharp patter like hail.

"Meteoric particles," said the girl turning a knob. "Paige deflector," she explained.

"For meteors as well as bullets, eh?" he suggested.

"For the iron ones. A stone might get through."

Uncomfortable thought. Minutes passed—half an hour. Suddenly the Princess moved something. Connor was nearly lifted from his seat by the sudden-lightness.

"Deceleration," she said, glancing down at the colossal convexity below. "Three hundred miles. Are you frightened?"

"Do *you* think so?"

She smiled a taunt. "I'll turn off the deflectors," she murmured.

There was a pattering roar. Something crashed glancingly above him and the floor tipped and spun like a juggler's platter. Margaret of Urbs laughed.

"Might I ask the object?" he queried.

"Yes," she said gently. "I'm going to commit suicide!"

As he caught his breath sharply, unbelievingly, she moved the lever before her, and the throbbing roar of the blast died suddenly. The sensation of dizziness that followed was a thousand times worse than that Connor had experienced in the swift Palace elevators.

He was utterly weightless. They were in a free fall!

The Princess was laughing at him. Deep in those lustrous, inhumanly lovely sea-green eyes of hers was the glint of mockery.

"Scared?" she whispered, as she had done repeatedly, and gave a low rippling chuckle at his silence. "Three hundred miles!" she jeered. A moment passed. "Two hundred!"

HE COULDN'T shift his gaze from the satanic beauty of her face, but he grimly fought his quivering lips to firmness. There was a low whine outside that rose abruptly to a screaming shriek that went gibbering across the world. The air! They had struck the atmosphere.

The floor grew warm, almost so hot it burned. At last Connor tore his eyes from the face of the Princess and gazed down at the up-rushing planet.

They were over ocean. What matter? At that speed it might as well be concrete. How high were they? Two miles—a mile? Less each succeeding second. The scream was a great roaring.

"We're going to crash," he said evenly, knowing she couldn't hear him.

Margaret of Urbs kicked a lever with a daintily casual foot. The blast roared out—too late! Or was it? Irresistible weight oppressed Connor as the sea rushed upward. So close it was now that he saw the very waters hollowed by the blast. That near!

But far enough. They were receding until the girl cut the blast again and set the rocket gently on the heaving swells of the Pacific.

Connor gulped. "Nice flying," he said steadily. "How often can you do it?"

"I don't know," she laughed. "I've never tried before. Scared?" The reiteration of that word was getting on his nerves as greatly as had the speed of the rocket.

"Did I show it?" he asked.

"I'm afraid not." Her voice changed

suddenly. She rose, whipped the beam-pistol from her side. "If I can't frighten you," she said, her eyes glittering, "I can at least kill you!" The beam flashed over him.

He took the shock unflinching. She slid her finger along the barrel until it stabbed harder, racking him. He bit his lips and gazed back into eyes, now deeply emerald. And at last she laughed and returned the weapon to its place.

"Were all ancients like you, Tom?" she murmured.

Somehow he managed a calm reply.

"Some stronger, some weaker," he said carelessly.

"I think I could love you," she whispered.

She thrust a hand suddenly toward him and involuntarily he started.

"Afraid of one thing, at least, aren't you?" she jeered. "Afraid of—me!"

Without warning he caught her arm, swept her suddenly to him. He pressed a fierce kiss on the perfection of her lips. She yielded instantly, returning the caress. For a moment her lips burned against his like strong wine, and lights coruscated in his spinning brain. With the Black Flame of Urbs in his arms, the world seemed to fall away as it had from the rising Triangle.

He felt her lips move against his, heard her murmur, "Tom! Tom! I do love you. Say you love me!"

"Love you? Love you?" he said. But just in time he caught that familiar gleam of mockery in her eyes. "Yes," he said. "Just as I love a drink of strong liquor!"

He pushed her roughly away, grinning sardonically. Margaret of Urbs laughed, but he fancied there was a quaver in her laughter. It was the first time he had seen the diamond hardness of her poise so much as ruffled. That is, since he had seen her in her robe of cruel Princess, the role she had played for seven hundred years. When he had seen her as a child of the woods she had been different.

But she quickly regained her hard control over herself. She slapped a trifle viciously at the controls, and the *Sky-rat* soared away from a boiling circle of ocean toward Urbs.

ARRIVED there, the Princess said not a word, but left Tom Connor at once. He wandered irresolutely to his room and opened Evanie's door. She sat propped against some cushions while a man in the garb of a Palace servant leaned above her. Both turned startled faces toward him. In amazement he recognized the man as Jan Orm of Ormon!

Tom Connor opened his mouth to cry an involuntary greeting to Jan Orm, but checked it at the sight of Jan's warning look and a gesture from Evanie. Of course! Jan was here in disguise, and there was the scanner with unwinking eye and attentive ear. Connor advanced to the side of Evanie's bed and bent over her.

"Don't look at Jan when you talk," she said softly.

"I won't. Lord, I'm glad to see you, Jan! I didn't know what might have happened to you."

"I'm working in the kitchen," whispered Jan, nodding at a tray on the wall-arm. He added eagerly, "Tom, you can help us! We need you."

"Help you to what?"

"To finish—" Jan began, but Evanie interrupted. "Help me to escape," she whispered, then shot a glance at Jan Orm. "Be careful of him, Jan," she warned. "He's been around the Black Flame."

Connor reddened. "Look here!" he muttered. "Here's exactly how I stand. For safety's sake, I've sworn to the Master to make no move against him for the present, and to tell him what I know of mathematics. That can't hurt you, can it? Evanie's safety is worth more to me than that."

He caught a sidelong flash of Jan's face gone suddenly blank. Jan's lips tightened grimly.

"What's the value of an oath to the

Master?" he growled. "That needn't bind you!"

"I keep my word," Connor said, as grimly.

"But your oath doesn't keep you from helping me to escape, does it?" whispered Evanie.

"I guess not—but what's the use of it? To suffer another Messenger?"

"This time," declared Evanie, "I'll fight off any Messenger. I was worn out before, exhausted, almost helpless."

"What can I do?" asked Connor, a little reluctantly.

"Are you free to move as you will about the Palace?"

"Not entirely."

"Well, I want to see the Master. I *must* see him."

"Why don't you call him and ask for an interview?" Connor asked.

"I have. All I can get is a statement from the vision room that he's busy in his quarters and can't come. I'm not supposed to leave my bed, you know." She paused. "It's probably true. Jan has heard that there's a Conclave of the Immortals of the South day after tomorrow." She glanced at Connor imploringly. "Can't you get me to him, Tom? Please—I must see him."

Connor smiled, amused, as a swift thought crossed his mind. Margaret of Urbs must indeed have been perturbed this morning. She had forgotten to reclaim her medallion. If he were to use it before she remembered—

"Perhaps I can help you reach him, Evanie," he whispered. "If you'll come at once."

THE GUARDS passed them without question, with only a glance at the medallion.

When they reached the anteroom beyond the arch they at once saw the Master at his littered desk. Evanie dropped gracefully to one knee as they neared the ruler. But Connor stood erect and stared at Margaret of Urbs, who sat in a chair by the window, a book on her lap, a black cigarette in her fingers spiraling smoke as she stared back at him.

The Master's eyes flickered over them.

"May I ask how you two managed to arrive here?" he inquired mildly.

Connor tossed the medallion on the desk, and his lips twisted in wry amusement when he saw the quivering start that twitched the dainty lips of the Princess. She arose quickly and moved to the Master's side. She and Evanie gazed at each other across the desk. The eyes of Margaret of Urbs were faintly disdainful but Evanie's were hostile.

It was Tom Connor's first opportunity to make a first-hand comparison of the two. He hated himself for making it, but here it was thrust upon him.

The Princess was a trifle taller, a bit more slender than Evanie, and infinitely more beautiful, lovely as Evanie was. It wasn't fair, Connor told himself bitterly. It was terribly unfair, in fact, to compare Evanie's beauty with the unearthly beauty of the Black Flame of Urbs. It was like contrasting the simple loveliness of a wild rose to the splendor of an orchid, or a brown milkweed butterfly to a star-flying Luna moth.

The Master spoke.

"I presume you have a reason for coming."

"Yes," said Evanie. "I can't stand being imprisoned in a single room. I had to see you." Her lips quivered. She was a consummate actress, Connor suddenly realized. "You know I—I have metamorphic blood in me. You know what that means. I *have* to move about in the open to breathe air that comes from the sky, not from Palace ventilators. So I've come to ask you for a little freedom. Just permission to walk now and then in the Inner Gardens."

Connor wondered how walking in the square of the Inner Gardens could encompass her escape, since the Palace surrounded it.

"It is my intention to release you, but not yet," the Master said. "Not until I have had what I wish from Thomas Connor."

"But I can't stand it!" the girl begged.

The Master turned to Connor.

"Remembering your oath," he said, "do you second this request? This is no move against me?"

"I do not break my word," Connor said.

"Well, I see no harm in it." The Master called a few syllables into the box beside him, then spoke to Evanie. "You have the liberty of the halls and the Inner Gardens—no more. As for you"—his eyes flickered over Connor—"apparently you manage without my permission. That's all."

Evanie dropped again to her knee, rose and moved toward the archway. As Connor followed, the Master called:

"Not you, Thomas Connor."

Connor turned again toward the faintly amused face of the ruler.

"I perceive," the Master said, "that my sister has disobeyed me."

The Princess laughed in that mocking way of hers.

"Do I ever obey you, Joaquin?"

"Nominally, at times." He paused, studying his sister coolly for a moment, then again turned his attention to the man before him. "As you may know," he remarked, "I have summoned a Conclave for day after tomorrow. I am completely occupied. But I do not forget your promise, Thomas Connor, nor have I lost interest in the stores of ancient knowledge. Therefore, you will accompany the Princess to the chambers behind the Throne Room and fulfill your promise by explaining to her as much as time permits of mathematics, particularly of the meaning of logarithms and of the device I have heard termed the slide-rule. She will understand you. That's all."

He met the eyes of the Princess. "I may obey you this time, Joaquin," she said, and moved out of the door.

CONNOR followed her. The halls betrayed the activity of the coming Conclave, and were more crowded than he had observed before. Twice grave-faced, long-haired Immortals passed them, raising respectful hands in salute to Margaret of Urbs.

She turned into the South Corridor.

"This isn't the way," he objected.

"We're going to the Tower." She glanced sideward at him. "You'll see soon why the Palace needs all its size. There'll be twenty thousand Immortals here, and we have room for all of them—half the Immortals in the world."

"Half! Evanie said there were three million."

She gave him an inscrutable smile.

"It does no harm to let the Weeds over-estimate our strength."

"Then why tell me?"

Her smile was the unfathomable one of the Mona Lisa.

"I never do anything without reason," was her reply.

He laughed. When once again they reached the aspiring pinnacle of the Tower, without a glance at the mighty city below the Princess pulled pen and paper from a table, seated herself, and faced Connor.

"Well?" she queried. "Begin."

He did. It was a new Margaret of Urbs he saw now, unknown before save possibly in that brief moment when he had mentioned the Venus of Milo, or when earlier in the woods she had shown him how vast was her knowledge of and interest in history and world events.

She was eager, curious, questioning, avid for knowledge, and uncannily quick to comprehend. There were queer gaps in her learning. Often he had to stop to explain terms utterly elementary, while at other times she followed him through the most complex maze of reasoning without a question.

The afternoon waned, dusk crept over the great vista, and at length she threw down her pen.

"Enough," she said. "We must have ten-place logarithm tables worked out. They'll be priceless at Eartheye." Not until then did a trace of mockery creep into her voice. "I suppose you realize," she taunted, "that once we have your knowledge all reason to keep you alive is

gone, but the reasons to kill you remain."

He laughed.

"You'd like to frighten me, wouldn't you? Haven't you tried that often enough? The Master trusts my word. I trust his—but not yours." His lips twisted. "Had I not trusted him, I could have escaped this morning. What was to prevent me from taking your weapon away, dropping you on a deserted shore—or even kidnapping you—and escaping in the *Sky-rat?* I never promised not to escape. What kept me here was my trust in his word, and a desire to see this game played out!"

"There is no safety anywhere in the world for you, Thomas Connor," said the Flame softly, "except in my favor. And why you still live is a mystery, so much so that I wonder at it. I have never before been so indulgent to one I hate." She flashed her glorious emerald eyes to his face. "*Do* I hate you?"

"You should know hatred better than I."

"Yes, and yet I wonder." She smiled slowly. "If ever I love the way I hate, not death itself could thwart me. But there is no man strong enough to conquer me."

"Or perhaps," he retorted, "that one isn't interested."

She smiled again with almost a trace of wistfulness.

"You're very strong," she admitted. "I should have loved to have lived in your ancient days. To have lived among your great fighters and great makers of beauty. At least those were men—your ancients. I could have loved one of those."

"And haven't you ever loved a man?" he asked ironically.

HE COULD detect no mocking note in her voice.

"Loved? I have thought myself in love a hundred times. At least a dozen times I have gone to Joaquin to beg immortality for some man I have loved. But Joaquin swore to Martin Sair long ago to grant it only to those worthy of it, and he has kept that oath."

She smiled wryly. "It takes all a man's youth to prove himself worthy, and so the Immortals are all dry scientists—not to my taste. Joaquin refused me each time I asked for the favor, wanting to know if I were sure I'd never tire of him for whom I begged—to swear I was sure. And of course I couldn't swear." She paused thoughtfully. "He was always right, too. I did tire even before old age blighted them."

"And what did *you* do to prove yourself worthy?" Connor mocked.

"I'm serious today," the Princess said. "I'm not teasing now. I think I could love you, Thomas Connor."

"Thank you." He grinned, suspecting the glitter in the green eyes, though he did not see it. "In my time it was the custom for the man to make such declarations."

"Your time!" flared Margaret of Urbs. "What do I care for your antediluvian customs and prehistoric prejudices? Would you have the Black Flame as shrinking and modest as little Evanie pretends to be?"

"I'd dislike you less if you were."

"You don't dislike me. You're merely afraid of me because I represent everything you hate in a woman—and yet you can't hate me. Indeed, I rather think you love me."

He laughed, mocking now, himself.

"I'm Margaret of Urbs!" she flashed. "What do I want of you? Nothing! I don't really want you at all, Tom Connor. You'd be like all the others; you'd age. Those mighty limbs of yours will turn skinny, or else fat and bloated. Those clear eyes will be pale and watery. Your teeth will yellow and your hair fall out, and then you'll be gone!"

She pulled a cigarette from the box and blew a plume of smoke in his impassive face.

"Go brag of this when we release you—if we do! Go tell it up and down the world that you alone of all men were strong enough to reject the love of Margaret of Urbs. Go say that the Black

Flame failed to scorch you, failed even to warm you." Her voice quivered. "And go say too that no other man save you ever learned how unhappy she is!"

The deep eyes were tear-bright. He stared into them perplexed. Was this merely more acting? Was there nothing left of Margaret of Urbs save a lovely masque and a thousand poses—no real being within? He forced a sardonic grin to his lips, for the impossible beauty of the girl tore at him despite his will.

At his smile her face darkened. "And then say," she said, from between tight lips, "that the Black Flame doesn't care what talk you make of her, because she burns on, while you—and those you talk to—in so very few years will be dust!"

Again he laughed at her and the Flame turned suddenly away.

"I suppose you may go now," she said dully.

But Connor hardly heard her. He was caught in speculations concerning the strange black and golden soul of the Princess, baffling, hateful, fascinating to the point of deadliness, and yet—somehow wistful, almost pitiful. It was almost, he thought, as if in the glimpse he had caught of her in the freedom of the woods he had seen the true soul of the woman, and all the rest was masquerading.

He stared across at the glory of her face, now subdued to sadness as she gazed out at a million lighted windows. Then a flicker of motion caught his eye, far, far beneath him in the well of shadows in the Inner Gardens.

"Someone's in the Gardens," he observed absently.

"Oh," said the Princess listlessly, "it must be an Antarctic Immortal, enjoying a garden under the sky." She clicked the vision screen. "Garden," she ordered dully. "North bank of the pool."

A burst of choked laughter startled him. He swung about. There, shown on the screen before his eyes, was Evanie, seated on a garden bench, her head on the shoulder of Jan Orm, his arm about her waist!

"A waiter!" the Black Flame said scornfully. "A Palace waiter!"

But despite her laughter and his own confusion, Connor did not fail to notice that there were still tears in her eyes.

XI

CONNER awoke late next morning, and to an instant memory of the shock he had experienced at the sight of Evanie and Jan Orm. Most of the night he had spent in improvising possible excuses for the girl. Perhaps it was an innocent scene he had witnessed.

After all, she and Jan were lifelong friends, born and raised in Ormon, and it might be that Evanie had turned to him in loneliness, or in pique at Tom Connor's own involuntary attendance on Margaret of Urbs. But the mocking suggestions of the Princess and the memory of Evanie's contented face in the vision screen troubled him. And he remembered, too, Jan's confession that he loved Evanie.

Dressing, he glimpsed her far below in the Inner Gardens, with her bronze hair glinting. She was lying at full length on the grass. He forgot breakfast and hurried into the corridor, where the guard, remembering the medallion of the Princess, merely saluted respectfully, unaware that Connor no longer possessed the disc of gold.

He descended at once to the ground level, followed an interminable passage toward the Palace's center, and flung open a door at its end. Instead of daylight, a dim chamber with glowing walls lay beyond, wherein, after a moment of blinking, he described a row of perhaps twenty men. Some stared at him, surprised, but most kept their eyes fixed steadily on the shining wall.

"I'm sorry," he said to the nearest man. "I was looking for the Gardens."

Unexpectedly, a voice spoke beside him.

"The Gardens are two stories above us, Thomas. And I see you still wander."

It was the Master. Beside him was

another Immortal, grave-eyed and sandy-haired.

"This is Thomas Connor," said the Master, "our storehouse of ancient knowledge. Thomas, this is Martin Sair, here from Austropolis." He added, "Thomas is one of those who affect not to kneel in our presence. I indulge him."

"Indulgence is a habit of yours, Urbanus," rumbled the sandy-haired man. "Does the Princess also indulge?"

"Not willingly. Margaret is having one of her restless years, I'm afraid." He frowned. "But they pass, they pass. Look there, Thomas." He gestured toward the wall. "This is our seeing room. Here is focused every scanner in Urbs—in any of my cities, if I wish. If the Palace is the world's brain, this room is the visual center."

Connor took his eyes from a fascinated scrutiny of the legendary Martin Sair, the Giver of Life, and glanced at the walls. Millions of tiny pictures covered them, each small as a thumbnail, glowing some in colors, and some when the distant origin was in darkness, in the dull blue-gray of the short waves. He saw flickers of movement as the pictured men and women went about their daily business.

"We can enlarge any scene there," said the Master, pointing at a row of wider screens, some even now illumined. "In this room I can follow a man's life from birth to death, so long as he remains in one of my cities." He paused musingly, then shrugged. "The Gardens are two floors above us, Thomas."

It was dismissal. Connor cast a last glance at Martin Sair, feeling as if he were gazing on a demigod. Martin Sair, the Giver of Life, greatest except the Master among all the heroic figures in the dazzling age of the Enlightenment. Then he backed away from the great Immortal and betook himself to the Gardens.

EVANIE was there, lovely as a bit of the ancient statuary that dotted the square, as she lay in the barbaric costume of Urbs watching a twenty-inch column of water slip smoothly from the mouth of a giant stone lion. She gave Connor a cool glance as he approached.

"Evanie!" he said unhappily. "I've looked everywhere for you."

"Why?" she asked indifferently.

"To be with you, of course. You know that."

"I don't know it. Or has the Flame burned you at last?"

Her coolness baffled him.

"Evanie," he pleaded, "why are you so offended?"

Her mouth hardened. "You've deserted the Weeds, Tom. Do you think I could ever forgive that?"

"See here, Evanie," he said hastily. "There's one thing you seem to have forgotten. I was thrust in among the Weeds of Ormon without choice. Does that mean I have to accept your social theories blindly? Perhaps I'm too primitive for anarchy, but I think you are too!" He went on defiantly. "I don't think your theories will work, and I do think the Master's government is what this world needs. It isn't perfect, but it's better than the Weeds offer. And even for you, Evanie, I won't give up freedom of thought."

"You mean you won't think!" she blazed. "You're not fooling me, Tom! I know the way the Black Flame poisons men, and you've been with her too often!" Her anger mounted. "Oh, go away!"

"Evanie," he began earnestly, and paused. *Was* he untouched by the devastating charm of the Princess? The dizzying warmth of her lips, his reeling brain in the hour on the Pacific— "She's the daughter of Hell!" he muttered.

"Go away!" flared Evanie. "You've deserted us!"

Hot words rose to his lips. But he suppressed his anger, even as the picture he had seen of Jan and Evanie flashed on his mental screen, and turned away into the Palace.

For an hour he stamped through the endless halls now crowded with arriving

Immortals from Africa, Antarctica, Australia, and South America. Now and again one turned cool eyes on his forbidding countenance or smiled gravely after him. None stopped or addressed him.

He must have completed the somewhat less than a mile of circuit several times when a guard approached him. He turned a furious scowl on the fellow, but he had only a tiny black envelope inscribed in white in the precise script of the Princess. Connor ripped the missive open. A short note was inside. It read:

Come to my chambers at half after the seventh hour to escort me to dinner. Wear the black costume in your quarters, and the black cape.
Margaret of Urbs

ALTHOUGH hours remained before the appointed dinner hour, he went back to his quarters, glancing indifferently at the Urban formal dress laid carefully on his bed. It was exactly like his present garb save that it shimmered black with metallic scales, and was edged with silver. Crossing to the window he sat staring down at Evanie in the Gardens, bathing her rounded limbs in sunlight, until Jan Orm, in Urban dress, joined her. He turned angrily away.

With no breakfast or lunch, he was both short-tempered and ravenous. So when the hours had dragged by, and he finally located the Chambers on the hundred and seventh level of the South Tower, he was in no pleasant mood. Two armed guards stepped aside, and the serving woman, Sora, admitted him with a clumsy curtsy.

He passed into the anteroom, furnished, as was the Black Flame's laboratory behind the Throne Room and her place at the summit of the Tower, lavishly and ornately. But surprise leaped to his eyes as he saw the gigantic black Persian cat that gazed steadily at him, with green eyes that seemed almost a replica of those of the Princess.

"A cat!" he exclaimed. "I thought they were extinct."

"Satan is immortal," said the soft voice of Margaret of Urbs.

He whirled and faced her as she emerged from the inner chamber, and hunger and anger alike drained out of him as he stared.

She was magnificent! Garbed in a jet-black cape that dropped to her green-crystaled sandals, she seemed taller as she advanced into the room. A circlet of emeralds bound her ebony hair, and beneath it her eyes were smoldering, sea-green fire.

But he felt the thrill of surprised shock as she threw open the cape. Her brief kirtle and coreselet glittered in a solid surface of green gems, and at her waist sparkled that mystic crystalline flower of many colors, glistening from red to violet, blue, and purest emerald. Then she moved toward the lamp, and in its yellow radiance her whole costume was green no longer, but the deep lavender of wine.

"Alexandrites," she laughed, answering his unspoken question. "Green by day, lavender by artificial light. Synthetic, of course. There aren't this many natural stones in the world." She turned. "Like it?"

"Exquisite!" he whispered. "You daughter of Lucifer!"

He followed her in rebellious fascination as they progressed unattended to the ground floor and into a long Palace car with stiff-backed driver and footman.

"Merimee's," she said, and the car spun silently away, mounting to the upper tier of Palace Avenue.

It was dusk, but now and then when traffic slowed their motion, cheers sounded, and many a glance was cast at them. Margaret of Urbs ignored the glances, but smiled at the cheers.

"Who's Merimee?" Connor asked.

"A rich Sleeper in Kaatskill. Society here is largely Sleepers."

"No nobility?"

"The Immortals seldom entertain. We're a serious lot."

Kaatskill appeared, and they glided into the grounds of an imposing Grecian

mansion. Lights were glowing, gay voices sounded as they entered.

There was a sudden silence as the whole assemblage knelt. Margaret of Urbs gestured and the guests arose. Merimee himself, paunchy, bald, came babbing his appreciation, his gratitude for the honor to his house.

"But the entertainment, Your Highness! On such short notice, you see—best the bureau could furnish—I know you'll forgive me."

THE DINNER was lavish. Connor sat at the left of the Princess. Lines of servitors passed in a steady stream, bearing soups, then fish—Bombay ducks, pompano, a dozen unknown viands—and fowl—ortolan, ptarmigan, pheasant, and nameless others.

Connor was ravenous. He sampled everything, and it was the middle of the meal before he noticed the aghast looks of the crowd, and that he was almost the only one who was eating.

"Have I violated the proprieties?" he asked the Princess.

"You're supposed to eat only of the dishes I taste," she informed him coolly.

"But I'm hungry. And you've eaten practically nothing." It was true. Margaret of Urbs had taken only a little salad, though she had sipped glass after glass of wine.

"I like to tantalize these hogs," she replied in low but audible tones. "This bores me."

"Then why come?"

"A whim."

He chuckled, turning his attention to the entertainment. This, he thought, was excellent. An incredibly skillful juggler succeeded a talented magician; a low-voiced woman sang sweet, ancient tunes; a trio played tinkling melodies. A graceful pair of adagio dancers performed breathtakingly in the square surrounded by the tables, and a contortionist managed unbelievable bodily tangles. The performers came and went in silence. Not one burst of applause rewarded them.

"Unappreciative audience!" Connor growled.

"Is it?" the Princess drawled. "Watch."

The following number, he thought, was the worst of the lot—a frightened, dingy man with a half-trained dancing monkey that chattered and grimaced, but made a sad failure of the dancing. Yet at the conclusion Margaret of Urbs raised her dainty hands and applauded.

Instantly bedlam broke loose. Applause crashed through the hall; encores were shouted, and the astonished player stumbled once more through the ludicrous performance.

"Well, his fortune's made," observed the Princess. "N'York will want him, and Chicago and Singapore as well."

The master of ceremonies was presenting "Homero, the Poet of Personalities," a thin-faced Urban crowned with laurel leaves and bearing a classical harp.

He bowed and smiled.

"And who, Ladies and Lords, shall it be? Of whom do I sing?"

"Her Highness!" roared the crowd. "The Princess of Urbs!"

Homero strummed his harp, and began chanting, minstrel-like:

"The Princess? Adjective and verb
Turn feeble! Glorious? Superb?
Exquisite? None of these can name
The splendor of the Urban Flame.

Our Princess! Stars are loath to rise
Lest they be faded by her eyes
Yet once they've risen, they will not set,
But gaze entranced on Margaret.

The continents and oceans seven
Revolve beneath the laws of Heaven;
What limit, law, or cannon curbs
The tongue that speaks the Flame of Urbs?"

Applause, violent and enthusiastic, greeted the doggerel. Margaret of Urbs lowered her eyes and smiled.

"Who now?" Homero called. "Of whom do I sing?"

Unexpectedly, Merimee spoke. "Tom Connor!" he cried. "Tom Connor, the Ancient!"

Homero strummed his harp and sang:

"Ladies and Lords, you do me honor,
Giving the name of Thomas Connor,
That Ancient, phoenix-like arisen
Out of his cold, sepulchral prison,
Thrust into life—a comet hurled
From the dead past into the world.

What poet great enough to sing
The wonderful awakening?
Let golden Science try explain
That miracle—and try in vain;
For only Art, by Heaved inflamed,
Can dream how Death itself was tamed!"

"He'll turn this into some insipid compliment to me," whispered Margaret of Urbs. The Poet of Personalities sang on.

Year after year the strong flesh
mouldered,
Dim was the spark of life that
smouldered—
Until the Princess glanced that way,
And lo! The cold and lifeless clay,
To Death and Time no longer slave,
Burst out triumphant from the grave!

IN THE roar of applause Connor sat amazed at the reference to his own experience. How did Homero know? He turned to question the Princess.

"I'm tired of this," she said, and rose to depart.

The whole body of guests rose with her. She drew her cape around her and strode to the car.

"Slowly," she ordered the driver, then leaned back gazing at Connor. "Well?" she murmured.

"Interesting. Homero is clever."

"Bah! Stock verses composed beforehand."

"But—about me?"

"Don't you know you've been a newspaper and vision sensation?"

"The devil!" Connor was shocked.

"This Homero," she went on musingly. "Once, long ago, I knew Sovern, the only great poet of the Enlightenment, he who half seriously, half contemptuously, named me the Black Flame, and the only man save you, Tom Connor, who ever flaunted me to my face. One evening he angered me, and I exiled him from Urbs. Urbs that he loved—and too late I found that his bitterness grew out of love for me.

"So I called him back in time to die, when not even Martin Sair could save him. And dying he told me he would take his revenge in remembering that I am human, and to be human is to love and suffer." She paused. "I have not forgotten that."

"And was it true?" asked Connor, struck suddenly by this revelation of the fiery, imperious, untamable character beside him.

"I think, lately, that it *is* true," she murmured, and drew a long breath. "I have slain, I have tortured, for less violence than you have committed against me."

She flung open her cape, baring the marks of his fingers still on the exquisite curve of her throat.

"I cannot suffer violence, and yet you have struck me twice and still live. There is a magic about you, Thomas Connor, some laughing ancient strength that has died out of the world. I have never feared anything in my life, I have never begged anyone—but I fear you and I plead with you." She swayed against him. "Kiss me!" she whispered.

He stared down at the unearthly beauty of her face, but there was a green light in her eyes that puzzled him. Coolly he fought the fascination that was cast about him. This was but another taste of the torment she had promised. He was sure of it.

"I will not," he said. "Each time I have kissed you, you have laughed at me."

"But I will not laugh now."

"You'll not trap me again by the same trick," he said. "Find another way for the torment you threatened. And when you're ready to kill me for the violence I did you, I'll die laughing at *you*."

"I have forgiven that," she said softly.

"Then," he said mockingly. "Here's more to forgive."

HE LIFTED her slender wrist in his mighty hand, circled it with his

powerful fingers, and crushed it in a grasp like contracting steel. It gave him a grim pleasure to thus vent his turbulent emotions on her, and to see her face whiten under pain that must have been excruciating. But save for her pallor she gave no sign of agony.

He dropped her hand, ashamed of his cruelty, though it was not as if he had used his strength against a mortal woman. Margaret of Urbs seemed to him more of a female demon.

But she only said softly, "I thank you for this. It has taught me what I wanted to know, for any other than you would now be dead for it. I love you, Tom."

"Flame!" he retorted, while her eyes widened the merest trifle at the familiarity. "I don't believe you."

"But you must! After all these years upon years I am sure. I swear it, Tom! Say you love me."

"I love — Evanie." But despite his words the doubts that had been constantly creeping in on him assailed him. Evanie was still alien.

"You love *me!*" she murmured. "I am the Black Flame, yet I plead now. Say it, Tom!"

"I love Evanie!"

"Then will you kiss me?"

He stared down at her. "Why not?" he said savagely. "Do you think I'm afraid of you?"

He spun her against him and her lips burned against his.

"Say you love me!" she repeated in a tense whisper. "Say it!"

"I love—" he began, and the car slid to a stop before the Palace arch. The footman stood holding the car door open.

Margaret of Urbs gazed as if distraught from Connor's face to the silent attendant and back again. Abruptly she thrust herself away, her mouth quivering.

"I wish," she said tensely, "I wish I had never seen you!"

She struck him a sharp blow across his mouth, clambered unassisted to the ground, and disappeared into the Palace, trailing her black cape behind her.

Back in his room again, Connor was in a turmoil, ashamed, perplexed, bitter.

"Caught!" he swore fiercely. "Burned! God! What a fool—what a weakling!"

For call it what he would—it was true. Fascination, infatuation, anything —the fact faced him that the Black Flame had burned Evanie from his heart. He swore viciously and battered at Evanie's door.

The blows echoed into silence. There was no response.

With a long-drawn sigh, Connor turned away from Evanie's door. Whether absent or simply ignoring him, she had failed him, and he needed her desperately now. He wanted to quench the fires of the Black Flame in her cool simplicity, to reassure himself that what he now felt was an obsession, anything but love.

He wanted to convince himself it was Evanie he loved by telling her so. Better never to have emerged from under the prison than to live again, loving a mask of beauty hiding a daughter of Satan.

He strode to the casement overlooking the Gardens. Dim light from the Palace windows streaked in bars across it, but he saw no sign of Evanie. But could that be Evanie—there where the bushes shadowed a pool?

XII

TOM CONNOR made his way hurriedly to the Gardens. He saw Evanie crouched in the shadow of shrubbery just above the brink of the water. He dashed forward as she glanced up at him.

"Evanie!" he began. "Oh, my dear—"

"Hush!" Her voice was tense.

"But—"

"Be still. Speak softly. Do you think I want a scanner on me?" She paused. "I'd rather you'd go away," she whispered.

He seated himself stubbornly beside her, though it seemed certain she was waiting for someone. Jan Orm, probably.

"I won't go," he said in subdued voice. "You've got to listen to me, Evanie."

"Please!" she murmured. "Be quiet, Tom. I've been waiting here six hours."

"For what?"

She made no reply. He subsided into gloomy silence, watching the great column of water that gushed from the jaws of the huge stone lion at the far end of the pool. The water, smooth as a steel pillar, fell with surprisingly little sound.

But while he gazed, it changed. The smoothness was broken. Bubbles flashed, and then the flow ceased altogether while a huge bubble glistened, billowed and broke. Something white and shining and large as a man shot with a small splash into the pool. The column of water crashed instantly back.

A webbed hand holding a silk-wrapped package rose suddenly from the black water. An amphimorph!

Evanie seized the bundle, crammed it beneath an Urban cape at her side.

"Quick!" she said tensely. "Stand here beside me, Tom, so we'll block the scanner."

He obeyed wonderingly. A queer low coo came from Evanie's lips. The black waters parted again and he glimpsed the tiny round mouth and horrible face of the creature in the pool. It flopped to the bank, scuttled desperately along into the bushes. He saw it raise the lid of a manhole or a storm-sewer, and it was gone.

Pale and trembling, Evanie sank down on the bank, her bronzed legs dangling toward the water.

"If only we weren't seen!" she whispered.

"How the devil did that thing get here?" Connor demanded.

"It rode a bubble down the water tunnel from the mountains, fifty miles away. An amphimorph doesn't need much air. A big bubble will last."

"But—"

"Don't ask me how it found the maze of mains in Urbs. I don't know. I only know they have queer instinctive ways of getting where they want to go. Now it's gone into the storm sewer. It will find its way to the Canal and go up rivers to its mountains."

"But what was that it brought, and from whom?"

"From King Orm."

"From whom?" he persisted.

"Tom," she said quietly, "I'm not going to tell you."

"What was in that package, Evanie?"

"I won't tell you that, either." She threw the cape over her arm, concealing the package. "I can't trust you, Tom. You and I are enemies." She backed away at his anger. "Tom, please! You promised to help me escape, didn't you?"

"All right," he yielded dully. "Evanie, I sought you out here because I wanted to end this misunderstanding. Please give me a chance to convince you I love you!"

He held out his arms to her. She backed another step.

"I won't come near you, Tom. I won't trust myself in your arms. I'm afraid of you, and I'm afraid of myself. You're too strong—too strong for me physically, and perhaps too strong otherwise. You wakened my love once. I dare not chance it again."

"Oh, Evanie! Now of all times, when I need you!"

"Need me?" A queer expression flickered over her face. "So the Black Flame burns at last!" Her voice dropped to a murmur. "I'm sorry for you, Tom. I'm sorry for anyone who loves her, because she's utterly heartless. But I can't come near you. I don't dare!"

She turned and darted suddenly into the Palace, leaving him to stare hopelessly after, and then to follow slowly.

HE SLEPT little that night. Restless, tortured hours were filled with dreams of Margaret of Urbs and the sound of her laughter. He arose early and wandered dully from his room.

The halls were crowded with arriving Immortals, among whom he stalked as silent and grave as themselves. At last,

tired of aimless wandering, he went into the shaded Gardens, and sat glumly down beside the pool.

Far overhead Triangle drifted with muffled, throbbing roars, and a bird sang in the bushes. Deep in his own perturbed thoughts, he was startled when he heard his name spoken softly, almost timidly.

"Tom."

He looked up. Margaret of Urbs stood beside him, garbed in the most magnificent gown he had ever seen, golden and black, and concealing her tiny feet. Instead of the circlet of the previous evening, she wore now a coronet of scintillant brilliance, and the strange flower flamed at her waist.

"Official robes," she said and smiled. "I preside this morning."

She looked a little worn, he thought. There was a pallor on her cheeks, and a subdued air about her. Her smile, almost wistful, tore at him.

"You didn't give me a chance to thank you for last night," he said.

"Did you want to thank me? For everything?"

"No," he said stonily. "Not for everything."

She dropped listlessly to the bench beside him.

"I'm tired," she said wearily. "I didn't sleep well, and my head aches. That Grecian wine. I must see Martin Sair."

"My head aches for other reasons," he said grimly.

"I'm sorry, Tom."

"Were you laughing at me last night?" he blazed.

"No," she said gently. "No."

"I don't believe you!"

"No matter. Tom, I came here to tell you something." She paused and gazed steadily at him. "The Master will grant you immortality."

"What?"

She nodded. "He considers you worthy."

"Worthy! What of the children of mine he was so anxious about?"

"You're to have them first."

He laughed bitterly. "Then I'll be old and feeble by the time I'm ready for immortality. Evanie has refused me—and I refuse him! I'll live my life out in my own way."

"Think well of it first," she said slowly, and something in her voice caught him.

"Now I know I won't accept," he flashed. "You begged him for it! Do you think I'd take favors of you?"

"I didn't —" She was silent. After a moment she said, "Would you believe one statement of mine, Tom?"

"Not one."

At last his bitterness touched her. She flushed faintly. The old gleam of mockery shone for an instant.

"You're right, of course," she snapped. "There's nothing real remaining of Margaret of Urbs. She's the Black Flame that burns on illusion's altar. You must never believe a single word of hers."

"Nor do I."

"But will you believe one sentence if I swear it by something sacred to me? One thing, Tom?"

"What's sacred to you? God? Honor? Not even yourself!"

"By the one thing I love," she said steadily. "I swear I'm speaking the truth now."

IT WAS on his very tongue to say no. He was thoroughly surprised to hear himself mutter "Yes"—and mean it.

"Then do you remember that day in the Triangle when I said I was going to commit suicide? I swear that is the only lie I've ever told you. Do you understand? The only lie!"

She arose as he stared at her uncomprehendingly.

"I want to be alone," she whispered. "I'm going to—" a brief, wistful smile—"my thinking room."

Connor's brain was whirling. He did believe her. What of it? Evanie didn't love him. He knew that now. And he didn't love Evanie. Margaret of Urbs said she loved him! Could it be possible?

The Black Flame might be his! The unearthly beauty of her, the wild, untamed character, his to tame—if he could. The satanic spirit, the fiery soul, all his for life. For life? For immortality, if he chose!

An exultant shout burst from him and went echoing between the walls as he went to the Palace door and hurried through.

Memory of Evanie had vanished like mist. Where was the Princess? In her thinking room? Then he remembered. The laboratory behind the Throne Room.

A speaker blared down the hall as he ran: "Conclave in thirty minutes."

The corridors were thronged; he jostled his way past crowds of guards, servants, officials, and auster Immortals. Curious eyes followed him, but no one moved to halt him.

Not, at least, until he reached the great arch of the Throne Room itself. The crystal doors were shut and a line of four impassive guards blocked the way. He moved to step between them, and a sharp challenge sounded.

He paused. "I want to see the Princess," he said firmly.

"None to pass," snapped the guard. "Master's orders."

"But is the Princess in there?"

"Her Highness," responded the guard, "entered here five minutes ago. She said nothing of any one to follow."

RELUCTANTLY, Tom Connor fell back. This was the only way to her laboratory; of that he was certain. He leaned against the wall and clenched his fists in a frenzy of impatience.

The glass doors opened and the Master emerged, accompanied by Martin Sair, and two other tall Immortals.

"Sir," Connor begged eagerly, "tell this fellow to pass me. I want to see the Princess."

A curious, quizzical expression flickered in the eyes of the great ruler. He shook his head.

"I'm sorry, Thomas," he said mildly. "In fifteen minutes the Princess will be needed. You can wait."

"But I think she wants to see me!"

"Then she can wait as well." His eyes flickered again. "She has waited, not too patiently, for more than seven centuries." He moved away down the corridor, leaving Connor nonplussed.

He curbed his impatience. After all, the Master was right. Time stretched before him and Margaret of Urbs, years upon years of it. But it was hard to lose these precious moments.

He thought of the vision screens. Just behind him was the vast office opposite the Throne Room. He turned in there, bursting in upon a scene of feverish activity as the records of half the world were made ready for the Immortals of the Southern Hemisphere. Glancing about, he descried a screen on a table at the far end of the room, and twisted his way down the line of desks, ignoring a thousand staring clerks.

"The Princess," he said eagerly, snapping the switch. "In her laboratory behind the Throne Room."

On the screen flashed a girl's face, but not that of Margaret of Urbs.

"I'm sorry," she said. "No calls to any at the Conclave. Master's orders." The screen clicked blank again.

In the hallway he saw Evanie, staring with strange intentness at the closed glass doors. He pushed his way to her side.

"Hello," he said, and was puzzled by her sudden lack of fear. But she recovered herself and glanced coolly at him.

"Oh, it's you," she said briefly.

He thought wonderingly how different was this Evanie from the timid, modest little Ormon girl of so few days ago. But he hardly cared. The Flame had burned him free of Evanie.

"Waiting for the parade of the Immortals?" he asked with a quiet smile.

"Perhaps."

"I thought you hated them so that you'd prefer not even looking at them."

Her voice changed to bitterness. "I do."

"Well, what's the answer, then?"

She glanced at a watch on her wrist.

"You'll know in a moment or two." She gave him a curiously sardonic smile. "I'm not afraid to tell you now. I'll even tell you what was in the package I took from the amphimorph. Would you like to know?"

"Of course."

Her voice quivered excitedly. "In that package was an atomic bomb!"

"An atomic bomb?"

"Yes. And do you know where it is now?" The voice rose, exultant, fanatically elated. "At the wall behind the Throne of Urbs! Behind the throne where the Master's sitting this moment!" She laughed at his horrified face. "My thanks for sponsoring my request for freedom, Tom. It helped."

"The Master isn't in there," he said tightly. "I saw him leave." He saw her face whiten — and then an appalling thought struck him. "Oh, God! But the Princess is! The Princess is!"

He dashed toward the guarded door, disregarding Evanie's cry of warning: "Tom, it's due! It's due!"

HE RUSHED at the impassive guards, but before their challenge was uttered a thunderous roar reverberated in the vast hall like the rumbling thunder of a collapsing mountain.

A continuous screaming bellow like the clamor in hell rose in an ear-blasting crescendo, and beyond the glass doors rolled billowing clouds of steam, shot through with jagged fires.

Maddened to desperation, Tom Connor plunged against the doors. They swung inward and closed behind him, and he was in the room of the blast. Far down, behind the Master's throne, an erupting geyser of destruction appalled him — a mighty, roaring, billowing cloud of smoke-streaked steam that shrieked louder than the tortured souls of the seventh circle of hell.

Crashing discharges of stray energy etched flames through the cloud, like lightning behind a thunderhead, and the reverberations echoed above the roar of the disrupting hydrogen. The Master's throne was hidden by the bellowing fires that grounded to it.

But even that holocaust had not yet filled the vast concave of the Throne Room. The end where Connor stood, momentarily bewildered, was as yet clouded only by shreds and streamers. He lowered his head, and charged into the inferno. Margaret was caught somewhere behind that hellish blast!

Scalding steam licked at him, swirling about his body. His bare legs and shoulders stung at the touch, his face burned, but he gained the line of thrones and paused a single moment on the shielded side. What an engine of destruction! A bomb that, instead of venting its force in a single blast, kept on exploding as successive billions of atoms shattered.

No need to look for the door. The detonation, the first blast, had blown the wall open. Instantly, he made a dash over the scorching debris, where the mighty girders were fantastically twisted and bent away from the roaring center, pointed up in the misty light. He launched himself at the edge of the opening, passing close to the very threshold of that trapdoor of Tophet.

Gamma radiations excoriated his body. The shriek of dying atoms thundered against his tortured eardrums, and he was burning, blistering. But an implacable thrust urged him on. He was responsible for this chaos, this holocaust, and Margaret of Urbs— He had violated his oath to the Master! Evanie had betrayed him into that, had tricked him into sponsoring her plea for freedom, and because he had aided her this had happened. Jan Orm could have done no damage alone. Only Evanie, because of the inhuman blood in her, could have dealt with an amphimorph. Evanie, with whom he had thought himself in love!

And the Princess, whom he did love, was somewhere beyond. He raged on, his mind turbulent as the blast itself,

into Martin Sair's laboratory, a flaming outer region of hell clouded to invisibility. Suffocating, scorching, he crashed against its farther wall, slid along it, at last found the door.

THE ROOM of the Princess was in chaotic disorder, but only lazy wisps of steam drifted there, and the bellow of the blast was muffled. But even now the wall was cracking.

"Margaret!" he cried. "Margaret of Urbs!"

Her voice answered him. She was in a corner, crouching. Injured? No, she was searching earnestly through a pile of debris that had been swept across the room by the first concussion. He rushed toward her.

"Come on!" he shouted. "We'll break a window and get out."

She glanced coolly up.

"A window? Try it. A bullet might, but nothing less."

He snatched up a chair, spun it fiercely against the pane. The chair shattered; two tiny dents showed in the crystal, and that was all. And in the Palace, ventilated by washed air from the topmost pinnacles of the Twin Towers, no windows opened. He whirled on her.

"Then it will have to be back through the blast!" he roared. "Come on!"

She stood up, facing him. She had slipped off her black robe in the steaming heat, wore now the typical revealing garb of Urbs save that the material was of black velvet instead of metallic scales.

"You can't go through in clothes like that!" he shouted.

"My Venus," she said. "It was blown somewhere here. I want it."

"You'll come now!"

"I want my ivory Venus."

The pale flash of ivory caught his eye.

"Here it is, then," he snapped, thrusting the statuette into his belt. "Now come."

Faint mockery flashed in her eyes. "What if I don't?"

He shook a rugged fist. "You will or I'll take you."

She was motionless.

"Why," she asked, "do you risk your life to reach me?"

"Because," he snarled in exasperation, "I was unwittingly responsible for this. I was tricked into breaking my word. Do you think I can let the Master —or you—suffer for my stupidity?"

"Oh," she said, her eyes dropping. "Well, I won't go."

"You will!" He sprang to seize her, but she evaded him.

But only for a moment, as again he saw the gleam of mockery in her eyes.

"Very well," she said, suddenly submissive.

He snatched the flowing robe from the floor as she turned and walked steadily toward the wall that now heaved and cracked and groaned. Before he could reach her she had flung open the door and hell roared in upon them.

Martin Sair's laboratory was a mass of smoke and steam like the crater of Erebus that flames in the eternal ice of Antarctica. Flinging the robe over the Princess like an enshrouding blanket, Connor propelled her, muffled and stumbling, toward the evil effulgence of the screaming blast.

At the break in the wall he put his weight into a mighty thrust that sent her sliding, staggering, sprawling into the room where the fiery cloud closed, billowing, about her. Then he leaped through, his flesh writhing in the torment of the stinging rays, and blistering at the touch of scalding steam.

MARGARET of Urbs was clambering to her feet, stumbling in the entangling robe, in the all but unbearable shelter of the thrones. She choked as the searing air reached her lungs.

"You hurt!" she cried.

"Come on!"

Again the taunting gleam, even with blistering death staring them in the face. But she followed unresisting as he seized

her arm and plunged through the blinding fog of steam and smoke that now filled the mighty room to the distant ceiling. Blind chance was their guide as they rushed ahead, staggering, coughing, teary-eyed. It seemed a long way. Were they circling in the gloom of the monstrous chamber?

The Princess dragged against Connor's arm.

"No," she gasped. "This way."

He let her lead. They struggled through billowing masses that began to take fantastic shapes of charging monsters, heaving mountains. She staggered, stumbled, but shook off the arm he raised to support her.

"I've never needed help," she muttered proudly. "I never will."

It seemed to him that the blast roared closer.

"Are we—right?" he choked.

Then, through a momentary rift he saw something that sickened him — the row of thrones, smoking and blackened in the blaze. They had circled!

Through some vagary of draught or ventilation there was a little area of almost clear air beside the throne of the Princess. Coughing and choking, they faced each other in it. He was astounded to see a flickering, taunting smile play for a single instant on her lips. Her hair singed and plastered flat by the steamy condensation, her face soot-streaked and reddened, she was yet so incredibly lovely that he forgot even their peril as her smile turned suddenly earnest, wistful.

"Dearest," she whispered, inaudibly, but he read her lips. "I'll confess now. We are safe in my room. We must have been watched in the vision screens, and men would have come to cut through the window."

He was appalled.

"Then why—"

"Listen to me, Tom. Even here I misled you, for I knew which way the door lies by the pattern on the floor. But if you will not love me and I must kill you as I promised, then let both of us die! For I cannot watch you age year by year—and then perish. I cannot!"

"Flame!" he roared, his voice impassioned. "But I love you! Did you think—I love you, Flame!"

Her streaming eyes widened.

"Oh, God!" she choked. "Now it's too late!" She covered her face, then abruptly glanced up again, with a dawning hope in her eyes. "Perhaps not!" she cried. "Can they see us here? No—the steam. But men will come in moon-suits to carry away the blast—if we can live until then." She coughed. "But we can't." She was swaying. "You go—that way. Kiss me, Tom, and leave me. I want to die on the throne—of Urbs. Only a thing like this, some accident—can kill an—Immortal!"

"Leave you?" he cried. "Not even in death!" He choked as he drew her close.

A wave of steam and fire engulfed them. "Help me to my—throne," she whispered, gasping.

Her eyes, bright and green in the fierce lightnings, went blank. They closed, and she slipped half through his arms. Her knees gave way as she collapsed.

XIII

HE HELD her against him. Put her on the throne? Why not? Why not hold her there until the end, die with her in his arms? Or perhaps shield her with his body until men came, or until the blast burned out. Somehow she must be saved!

Never — not even when a thousand years ago an electric current was shot through him to kill him, had his urge for life been so great as it was now. Now, when life promised so much—the love of himself and the Black Flame of Urbs, two beings who should have been dead centuries ago and in different ages —he must die!

Had Destiny kept them alive to meet and love for this brief moment before death? Better to die struggling for life. Raising the girl in his arms, he stag-

gered away toward the wall that still shielded the room where he had found the Princess.

Her weight was slight, but he had not taken ten steps when he went crashing to his knees. He struggled up dizzily. The line of diagonal black square showed dim on the floor, yet he could not be sure that he had not changed his direction. He was suffocating; the roaring blast seemed to bellow in a gigantic throbbing, now in his very ears, now dim and faint and far away.

He battled on. Suddenly he realized that he was moving burdenless. Without even being aware of it he had dropped the Princess. He turned grimly back until he stumbled over her lying huddled with her cheek against the steaming floor. Swinging her across his shoulders, gripping her knees so tightly that his fingers bit into the soft skin, he staggered back over the lost ground.

Each step was a gamble with death. If he fell now he would never rise again. He tottered on while his lungs labored in the vitiated air and the searing steam. Then behind him the blast roared fainter. Or was it simply that his senses were dulling?

It was the sharp blow of his head against the wall that brought him back from a dreamy somnolence into which he was falling, surprised to feel the weight of the unconscious girl still on his shoulder.

Which wall? In what direction was the door that meant life? He groaned and turned at random to the right, simply because his right arm clutched the limbs of Margaret of Urbs and his left hand was free to support him against the carved masonry. But an ejaculation of triumph escaped his burned, cracked lips as his hand slid over steam-clouded glass, and he saw white faces through the track it left.

He could go no further; make not one more move. The limp body of the Princess slid from his arms, and vaguely then he knew that both of them were being dragged into the safety of the corridor. He gasped in great breaths of clear air that whistled in his burning throat, and then his heart chilled as his bloodshot eyes turned on the form of the Flame.

Her face frightened him. Waxen pale, still as the image on her throne, she seemed scarcely to breathe.

A grave Immortal who bent above her straightened up and said tensely, "Get Martin Sair—quickly!" His eyes flashed to Connor. "You're not hurt," he said. "Just rest here for a time."

There was a stir in the hallway. Two men in brown, all-encompassing suits and crystal helmets were pulling something metal. It looked like a steam-shovel scoop with two fifty-foot handles. It was a grapple for the blast, to box it before it undermined the vast Palace.

Then Martin Sair was at hand, and the Master, his sorrowful eyes on the Princess.

"Clear the corridor," said the sandy-haired Immortal, and guards swept back the crowd.

Through the North Arch, Connor glimpsed thousands upon thousands of Urbans on the Palace lawn, and then they were hidden as the gates closed.

"He must go, too," said Martin Sair, nodding at Connor. "The fewer lungs here the better. The girl is asphyxiated."

"No!" Connor croaked, flinging an arm across the Flame.

"All right. Move aside, then."

But a roaring like all the tortured souls since creation burst from the opening doors. Out rushed the gnome-like men pulling their grapple, and Connor thrust his body between them and the Princess, taking the fierce rays on his own flesh.

THE CONTAINER glowed brilliant as the sun, and out beyond the North Arch a chain dropped from the sky—a Triangle to bear away the deadly thing, to drop it into the sea. And the Palace was silent now as the silence of death.

Death? Tom Connor glanced fear-

fully at the marble features of Margaret of Urbs. They were like death, too, and he gazed so fascinated that he was utterly surprised to look up and see Evanie and Jan Orm herded down the corridor by half a dozen grim guards.

"Trying to escape out of the South Gate," said one.

The Master turned burning eyes on them, and then again looked sorrowfully down on the still perfection of the features of the Black Flame.

An Immortal placed a box at Martin Sair's side.

"Adrenalin!" snapped the Giver of Life, and took the tube the other handed him. "Amino-hyoscine! Deturamine!"

He pressed the pale flesh of the girl's arm, parted the closed lids to gaze into unseeing eyes. Finally, in the familiar manner of an ancient physician, he placed thumb and forefinger on her wrist, frowning as he felt for the faint throb of her pulse.

"Suffocated," he repeated. "Asphyxia."

In an agony of apprehension, his eyes blurred, Connor watched the slow rise and fall of her breast. Twice he fancied that the movement had ceased and each time, with an almost inaudible gasp, the labored breathing recommenced. Then it did cease; he was positive, and a great wave of despair engulfed him.

"Her heart's stopping," Martin Sair said briefly.

Tom Connor gazed wildly about the corridor. Uncomprehending, he saw the grim light of triumph in the face of Evanie Sair as she looked coldly down on the fading glory of the Black Flame.

That such beauty should perish—be thrust into the earth—turn into a heap of crumbling bones!

"Dying!" Connor gasped again.

The Giver of Life glanced coldly at him.

"Dying?" He echoed impassively. "No. Dead. What of it?"

The Master turned grimly away and passed silently into the Throne Room with a word of brief command to the guards. They thrust Evanie Sair and Jan Orm before them, but Tom Connor did not miss the backward glance of triumph which the girl flung defiantly at him.

Connor gazed desolately on the lovely clay that had been the Black Flame of Urbs, wondering dully why Martin Sair still bent so attentively above her, still kept the pale wrist in his hand.

He started when the austere Immortal moved, placed his lips close to the cold ones of the girl, and rapped out:

"Now! The Mask!"

The Giver of Life jammed a cone over the still face. There was a moment's silence; nothing happened. The scientist bent closer. Abruptly he placed his hands about the waist of the Princess, shook her violently, until her head rolled from side to side. He slapped her breast, her cheeks. And then, like the faint sighing of evening wind, she breathed.

A thin, muffled gasp—no more. But life-bearing oxygen flowed into her lungs, and the suspended metabolism of her body resumed its interrupted chemistries. Her breathing strengthened to a labored, whistling panting.

"Chain-Stokes breathing," muttered Martin Sair, whose genius had recalled a spirit already treading the pathways of eternity. The Black Flame, rekindled, burned dimly and flickeringly — but burned!

IT WAS past Connor to comprehend. The transition from the deeps of desolation to the peak of hope was too vast to span in a moment. He merely gazed blankly on the mask-covered face of the Princess. When realization began to dawn, the cry of amazement and ecstasy strangled in his throat and became only an inchoate gurgle. He managed a choked question.

"Will she—live?" He moved as if to clasp her in his arms.

"Don't!" snapped Martin Sair. "On your life, don't touch her yet. Give her red corpuscles time to oxygenate. The girl's asphyxiated, suffocated, strangled.

Do you want it all to do over again?" His eyes perceived the anguish in Connor's face, and he softened. "Of course she'll live. Did you think Death could so easily defeat Martin Sair? He has beaten me many a time, but never in so mild a contest as this!"

The great Immortal again bent over the girl. Her breathing had eased. For a terrible instant Connor thought it was ceasing once more. Martin Sair lifted the mask from the pallid, perfect features, still quiet as marble save for the sighing of her breathing.

"Now the *elixir vitae*," he said. "That will put fire into this chilly blood."

He took a phial of ruby liquid from the hand of his silent assistant, the same potent stimulant, it appeared, that had aroused Evanie from the death-like sleep of the Messenger.

The Princess was far too deep in unconsciousness to swallow. Martin Sair poured a tiny, trickling stream between her lips, no more than a few crimson drops. It was enough. As it made its fiery way down her throat she moaned and her exquisite face twisted as if in agony. The limp hands clenched convulsively into white fists.

Martin Sair rose.

"You see," he said to his grave assistant, "there was nothing organically wrong. Oxygen-starved, that was all. The organism was undamaged. The blood had not even begun to coagulate. It was simply necessary to start the body machine working, since it was in perfect running order."

"Cardiacine is a gamble," his assistant said slowly. "I've had it rupture the hearts in some cases."

Martin Sair snorted. "Not with proper precautions. Daturamine and aminohyoscine first. Cardiacine *is* powerful, of course." He mused. "I've seen it produce pulsations in the heart of a man ten days dead."

Connor ceased to listen. Cases! As if this were a medical case—this miracle! They droned on without even a glance at the pain-racked, exquisite face. Tom Connor touched her cold cheeks, kissed the soot-streaked forehead.

"Careful!" warned Martin Sair.

"But she breathes!" Connor whispered exultantly. "You're certain she'll live?"

"She'll be conscious in ten minutes. A little sick, but conscious." The scientist's tone softened again. "In two days she'll be as bright as ever. After all, her body is the body of a twenty-year-old girl. She has youth, resilience. You can stop worrying."

Someone touched Connor's shoulder; a guard, who began droning, "*Orbis Terrarum Imperator*—"

"I won't go!" Tom Connor blazed. "I'm staying here!"

"She's out of danger, I tell you," insisted Martin Sair. "If she were ever in danger, with me at hand!"

Hesitantly then, Connor followed the guard, glancing apprehensively back at Margaret of Urbs, prone on the stone floor of the corridor. Then reluctantly he went on into the Throne Room.

IN THE Throne Room the ventilators had drawn out the steam and smoke-poisoned air, but moisture dripped from the walls and gathered in pools on the floor. The terrific destruction of the blast was evident everywhere. No single hanging remained on walls or windows. Everything inflammable was in cinders, and the floor was still almost blistering hot.

The far end was a mass of indescribable ruin, debris from the shattered wall, even fragments of the diorite bases of the thrones. The air, despite the humming ventilators, was stifling in the radiations from floor and walls.

The Master sat upon the half-melted wreckage of his throne, his stern eyes on Evanie and Jan Orm, who stood between guards before him.

The frightened look on Evanie's face moved Connor despite the injuries she had done him. After all, she had nursed him out of the very grave and given him, penniless and strange, a home and

a place in this bizarre world. She was clinging frantically to the arm of Jan, who stood morose and impassive before the Master.

"Thomas," the ruler said, "I can get nothing from this sullen pair. Tell me what you know of this."

Connor met Evanie's terrified gaze, and it wrung pity from him. He owed much to this girl. Was it any more than right that he help her now? At least he could confuse the issue, prolong it until he could obtain the aid of Margaret of Urbs.

"I did it myself!" he said promptly.

There was no change in the Master's face.

"You?" he repeated mildly. "How?"

"I made the bomb in Martin Sair's laboratory," Connor said, with a quick warning glance at Evanie. "I made it at night, and smuggled it in here during the darkness. That's all."

"Indeed? After your oath, Thomas? And I had flattered myself that you were my friend—my esteemed friend."

There was something inscrutable in the Master's face. The grave eyes surveyed Connor sorrowfully as he fingered a beam-pistol.

"I think," said the Master, slipping out the weapon, "that I will destroy you once and for all, Connor." He leveled the gun.

"Wait!" shrieked Jan Orm. "He didn't do it—I did!" He paused as the Master's cool eyes shifted to him. "I had it made in Ormon and smuggled here to me. I hid it in the Throne Room early this morning, before any one was about!"

"Well," said the Master slowly. "I might believe that both of you had a hand in it."

His eyes flickered over Evanie.

She drew herself erect.

"What's the use?" she said dully. "I won't have you two shielding me. I did it. I had the bomb smuggled to me by an amphimorph, who rode a bubble down the mains to the pool in the Gardens. That's the truth."

"Suppose, then," said the Master, "I destroy all three of you, and thus assure myself that the guilty one is punished."

"I don't care!" Evanie flung out defiantly. "I'm sorry I failed, but at least I've extinguished the Black Flame of Urbs—and I'm glad!"

THE RULER'S eyes held a curious light as he gazed over their heads. A step sounded behind them. Connor whirled to see Margaret of Urbs approaching, supported by the arm of Martin Sair. Soot-stained, the whole slim length of her right leg red and blistered by the blast, her right cheek inflamed by the contact with the steaming floor, she was still so incredibly lovely that she was breath-taking. Tom Connor sprang to her side, slipped a steadying arm about her as she swayed willingly against him. Evanie, so pale she seemed about to faint, was leaning weakly against Jan Orm.

"What's all this, Joaquin?" asked the Princess.

"Merely an attempt to fix responsibility for the bombing, my dear."

"And have you fixed it?"

"All three claim the honor."

"I see." She paused. "Well, I can throw some light on the mystery. *I* am responsible for the bomb explosion. It was an accident. I was watching some detonol crystallize, in Martin Sair's room, and forgot to take it off the burner. I was stunned by the concussion, and Thomas Connor rushed in and guided me out. Somewhere in the Throne Room I suppose I must have been overcome." She paused again, staring back at the Master. "Don't you see? Each of these three suspects the others and each is trying to shield his friends. But I did it. It was an accident."

She slipped from Connor's arm and sank wearily to the steps that led to her ruined Throne.

"I burn!" she muttered, and sipped the goblet of water that a guard held to her lips.

Quizzically, the Master gazed down at her.

"You know," he said, suddenly stern, "that to me the one unforgivable sin is the thwarting of my plans. Not even you, my sister, may stand in the way of them. While I live, I am the Master. I shall yield only when a power arises strong enough to overthrow me, for that will tell me that my work is done. When that occurs, I shall have guided humanity as far as I am able along the path of Destiny, but until then I am the Master."

His face, austere as an image in basalt, loomed over them. For the first time Connor glimpsed dimly the colossus behind the mild mask, the diamond hardness below the silk that sheathed it.

Then the ruler smiled.

"I suppose I cannot doubt my sister's word. I release all of you."

He arose and descended from the throne.

Connor followed a step or two. "I'm interested to learn," he whispered, "which of us you believe."

The Master smiled again. "Haven't I just said?" He turned away. "Of course, If I were curious, I could ask you and Jan Orm how you knew what time to set the blast. I hadn't decided on a time for the Conclave until I had it announced in the corridors, and the bomb must have been placed between that moment and the arrival of the guards."

"Or the Princess is telling the truth," suggested Tom Connor.

"Some day Margaret shall explain why detonal causes a cloud of steam," observed the Master. He continued absently, "Evanie has good blood in her. So has Jan Orm."

Then he was gone, followed by Martin Sair and the guards.

Connor returned to Margaret of Urbs. Evanie's incredulous eyes were fixed on the Princess as she whispered:

"Why did you do that?"

"Because I thought it would please Tom Connor," Margaret of Urbs said frankly.

Evanie stared at her with yawning comprehension.

"The Black Flame herself burned!" she murmured wonderingly. "I see now why we can still learn from the ancients. They're miracle workers." But the next instant her brown eyes glittered vindictively. "I'm glad at least that the conquest of the Flame was during my life time." She bowed half in wonderment, half in mockery, before Connor. "I salute the Prince consort of Urbs."

The Princess flushed faintly, and Connor laughed and glanced away. Something that sparkled in a pile of ashes caught his eye.

He stooped to retrieve the marvelous crystalline flower, glowing brilliant and indestructible, untouched—even brightened—by the blast.

"What is this?" he asked.

"My moon-orchid," said Margaret of Urbs. "The only perfect one ever found."

He grinned and turned to Evanie.

"I promised you one. Here—our wedding present to you and Jan."

"Engagement present, rather," said the Princess. "I owe you two somewhat more than you realize." She ignored both Evanie's silence and Jan Orm's protestations of mingled embarrassment, thanks, and refusal as he held the priceless thing. "Tom," she murmured, "would you mind if we were—alone?"

IT WAS dismissal. Jan and Evanie backed away with half awe-struck glances at Connor. He dropped beside the weary Princess of Urbs, slipping his arm tenderly about her shoulders. Even in the sultriness of that blasted chamber she shivered, her teeth chattered, so recently had the icy face of death withdrawn.

He drew her close, then halted as he heard a distant, thin clamor beyond the windows.

"What's that?" he asked sharply. "Another revolution?"

"Just the newspapers, I guess. You've

been in them frequently of late." She smiled wanly. "As often as I, this past week. The Weed who sustained the ionic beams—revealed as a living ancient—proclaimed for immortality—the rescuer of Margaret of Urbs—and now—" She quoted ironically, "'Margaret to Wed? Romance Rumored with Rescuer!'" She nestled closer to him. "Oh, the downfall of the Black Flame will be well publicized, never fear. Let them add this to their pictures and vision broadcasts. I don't care!"

"Pictures? What pictures?" He glanced about the vast deserted chamber.

"From the seeing room, of course! Don't you suppose we were watched all during the blast, even in here, as much as the steam permitted? Don't you know we're being watched now, photographed for papers, and broadcasts? You're world news, Tom." She frowned. "They must have thought me mad to rush into that inferno with you, out of safety. Well, I was mad!"

"You can't even die in privacy here!" Connor said bluntly. "Do you suppose—"his voice dropped to a whisper —"they heard what we said?"

"Above the roar of the blast? No. I thought of that when I said it."

HE SMILED at that. It was so typical of the utterly strange and fascinating character of the girl. He drew her against him, and felt the pressure of something hard in his belt—the ivory Venus, still safe, still immaculate in its perfection, since it had been on the left side, shielded by his own flesh when he passed the blast.

"I know what I shall give you as a wedding present," he said slowly. "The original Venus de Milo. The most beautiful statue of the ancient world."

She smiled and a trace of the old mockery showed.

"And I know what I shall give you," she said. "Life!"

"Immortality?"

"Not immortality. Life." She turned her emerald eyes on him and asked: "Tom, is it very hard to give up the idea of children? Men want children, don't they?"

"Most of us do, but it's a happiness well lost for you." He glanced down at her. "Listen, can't immortality be undone? Wouldn't it be possible for Martin Sair to render you mortal for a few years?"

"Of course. Further exposure to the hard rays will do it."

"And then," eagerly, "could we—"

The smile she flashed at him had in it a touch of heaven. "Yes," she said exultantly, but instantly a cloud chased away the smile. "But don't you remember what sort of children women bear who've been too long in the ray?" she whispered. "Amphimorphs, Tom! Would you like to be father to a little amphimorph?"

He shuddered. "Thank you. We'll do as we are, then."

SHE burst suddenly into laughter almost as mocking as her old self.

Then she was as suddenly serious, tender.

"Tom," she murmured, "I won't tease you. That will be my gift to you. Martin Sair can do what you wish. There is some leeway to the process—enough, perhaps, for a time. I'll give you five years of mortality. My permanent age is twenty, now; it will be twenty-five then. But who in all the world could have anticipated that the Black Flame would assume motherhood—and like it? Tom, that's my gift to you. Life! Kiss me!"

For a moment of ecstasy he felt her lips quiver against his.

"Two boys and a girl!" she murmured softly.

"Can Martin Sair," he asked ironically, "fix that for us, too?"

"Of course. Two boys like you, Tom." She was suddenly dreamy-eyed.

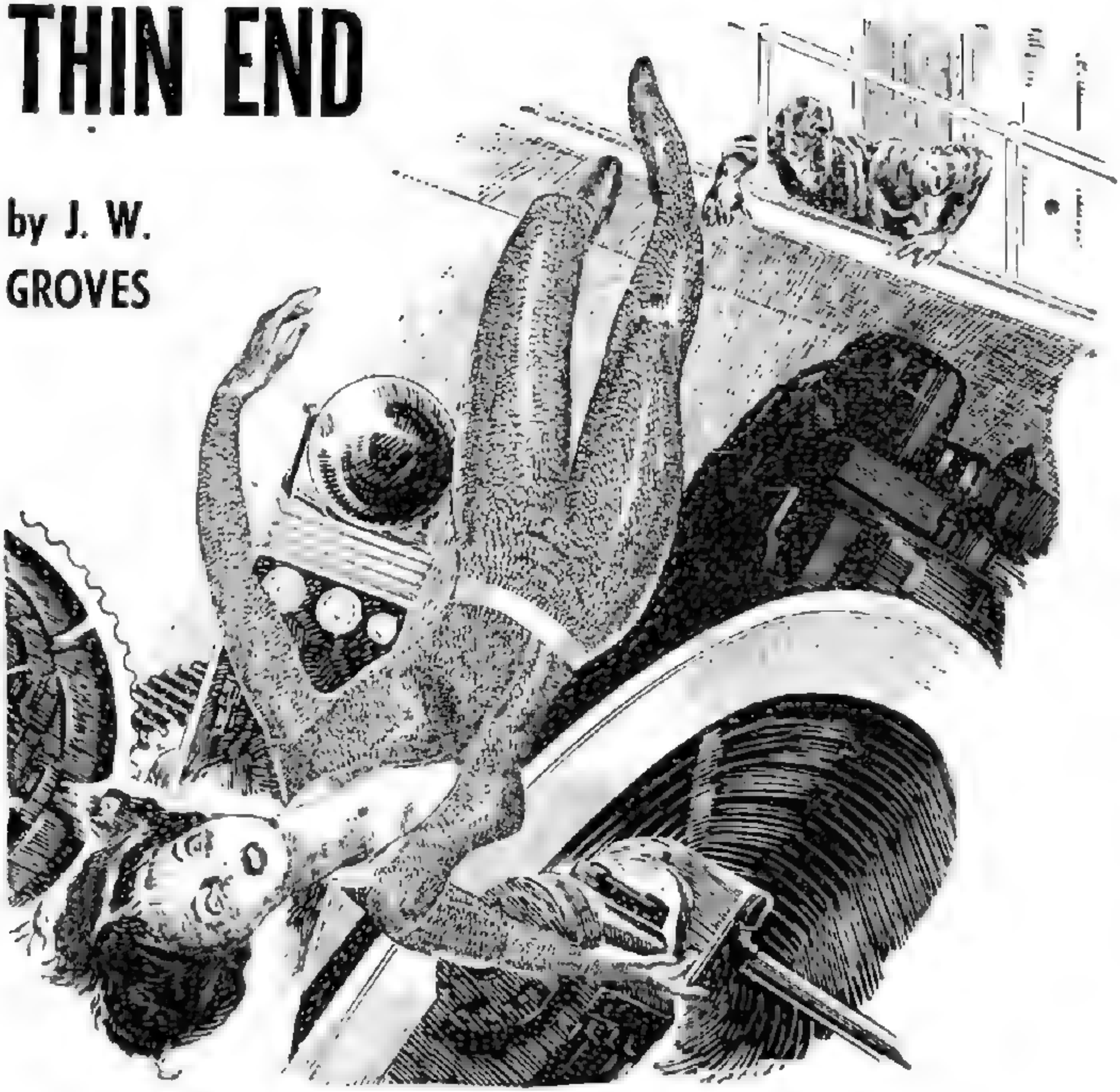
"But not a girl like you."

"Why not?"

"Because," Tom Connor laughed, "I don't think society could stand a second Black Flame!" ● ● ●

THIN END

by J. W. GROVES



Jim dived to the rail to watch Mary plummet into the swift-meshing gears

Deep in space, a man suddenly discovers his own wife to be one of the dreaded, nearly-extinct paranorms!

HE should never have left the turret inspection-door to the main engine room open, of course. And certainly he should have wiped up the oil immediately after he dropped it, not left it to spread out in a slippery patch over the metal plates of the catwalk. But the owners of small pleasure-craft are notoriously space's most careless navigators.

He was halfway across the connecting corridor when he heard his wife's shrill scream. He swung round and flung himself back through the door, fear lending him extra speed.

Her slim body, white-clothed, was just disappearing. She had fallen and slid to the edge. The single guard-rail was too far above her head to save her. He made futile grabbing motions though he was still a dozen feet away. Then he dived to the rail to watch her

plummet, screaming still, towards turning axles and giant swift-meshing gears.

His throat was dry, his eyes rigidly wide as he waited for the horror of crunching bones—of spurting blood. And then a greater horror intervened. She floated to one side, clear of danger, and landed gently on her feet.

His numbed mind would not accept that at first. It tried to pretend that his eyes had lied, that the wide footway round the engine was directly below the spot from which she had fallen.

And all the time he knew it was not so. She had been falling to certain death until the laws of gravity had gone crazy. And the laws of gravity—even the pseudo-gravity of mattract plates—do not invert themselves crazily for normal people.

He stayed where he was, sick with shock, trying to realize all that it meant, until he heard her feet pattering lightly up metal stairs. Then he turned and stumbled towards their cabin. There was a gun there— A little electron-stream sporting model that they had brought along for shooting the Arico bats of Mars.

THE small cylinder felt cool in his palm until it grew sticky with his sweat. He met her in the corridor outside, fixed his gaze on the trim white waist of leatherine snug-suit. That was the thing to do. Never meet their eyes when you looked at them. That way they couldn't control you. At least so people said. Nobody really knew.

He spoke to her, his voice furry. "You —you levitated."

She was quiet for a long time while he glared at her waist. Then she answered in a tired voice. "Yes, Jim, I levitated."

The words set him trembling, increased in fury the turmoil of clashing emotions inside him. He would have called her a liar if she had denied it. But all the time there had lingered in one corner of his mind a wild hope that she *would* deny it—that she would indignantly refute his implied accusation and somehow beat down his skepticism so that he could believe her.

Now, though, he had to face the truth—and with it the duty that truth laid upon him. A duty that he owed to himself and the men he had fought with and the whole human race—a simple duty—just to pull a trigger.

But this was Mary—*his* Mary, the Mary of that soft sweet spring and long glowing sun-drenched summer that had preceded the war. The Mary who, in the fall, had promised in a bravely controlled voice to wait for him until the fighting was over. And who had faithfully kept that promise.

"Three years," he said in a low, flat tone. "Three years I spent with the Human Navy, fighting the paranorms until we thought we had exterminated them completely. And all the time my own wife—"

"We can't help being what we are born, Jim," she said sadly.

Unthinkingly he lifted his eyes to hers and knew instantly that it had been a mistake. The gun leaped from his hands, seemingly of its own volition, though he knew that actually an involuntary movement of his own muscles had made him throw it away.

She bent to pick up the weapon. Freed from the compulsion of her eyes he turned and ran up the corridor. As he raced along, his feet tap-tapping softly on the rubberoid floor covering, he formed inchoate half-plans for getting to the com-room, radioing frantically to Earth.

But of course she had thought of that first. As he turned the last corner he saw her in front of the com-room door, waiting for him.

There's only one way she could have got there in that time, he thought grimly —teleportation. Well, thank God there were limits to that power. The best of them couldn't cross a million miles of space without a ship. And she was no pilot. She was locked out as surely as he was unless she got the chance to

take over his mind.

Weaponless, too dizzy to think properly, he ran back to the cabin, slammed the heavy door behind him and locked it. Many of them could teleport through solid matter providing its elements were low in the atomic scale. But the more complicated structures of proton and electron baulked most of them. None but the ablest could teleport through parasteel.

At least that was what they had taught him in the Space Navy. Though they had been careful to warn him that nobody knew for certain. Nobody knew for certain what the limits of their powers were.

Evidently, though, the parasteel walls of the cabin were enough to stop Mary. For he heard her knock softly on the door.

"Let me in, Jim, please," she pleaded quietly.

His only answer to that was a harsh short laugh. She began to talk again. "Jim. You're making a terrible mistake."

"I'm not *making* it. I *made* it. Four years ago when I married you."

He heard her sob and the sound wrenched at the heart of him. He gritted his teeth, deliberately hardening himself. "Go away. Go away and let me alone."

She went away for a little while. But after an hour or so he heard her knock again. "Jim, what are you going to do?"

"I don't know. I've got to think. Just let me alone."

"But Jim. All the food concentrates are in there. And the water converter."

IN HIS confusion of mind he had not realized it up to then. Now he laughed sharply. "Fine. That makes everything just perfect."

It didn't though. He knew that he'd never be able to stick it if she came to him starving, thirsty, pleading for food and water. He had to kill her—but he had to find some more humane way of doing it. Shooting or strangling—

Shooting? Strangling? Dear God, this was Mary! Mary, with whom he had camped on the flower-jeweled slopes of Venusmount. Mary, with whom he had raided the glittering shop-palaces of New York. . . .

He pulled himself out of it with an effort, forced his mind to concentrate on the war, on the purple bloated bodies he had seen. On the friends he had known who had gone into action and never come back, on the thick, heartening hatred that all of them had felt for those damned paranorms.

All the same it was foolish to think of shooting or strangling. He had no gun and he'd never be able to get near enough to her to strangle her without giving her a chance to master him. He'd have to devise something more subtle.

He wondered if she was following his thoughts all the time. The Naval instructors said it couldn't be done. That reading someone else's mind without their cooperation needed a strong mental effort on the part of the paranorms, one that couldn't be maintained for long without exhaustion. That is, as far as anybody knew.

He got some proof that it was true when he thought of the airshaft before she did and was left in peace to drag the heavy metal wardrobe in front of it and jam that into place with several other pieces of furniture.

A half-hour later, when Mary teleported through a thin screen in some other part of the ship, along the open airshaft, and up to the cabin, he was sitting down waiting for her.

He heard her grunt with pain as her teleported body slapped back into solidity against the wardrobe.

"Sorry," he said quietly. "No entry that way."

"Jim," she pleaded from behind the furniture. "Jim. Please—I've got to talk to you."

"Not interested."

"But Jim, you've got to be interested. It's so important to both of us."

He remained silent, crouching stiffly

in his chair. After awhile she went on. "Jim. Why should you hate me or fear me? Have I ever done any harm to—to your kind of people?"

"You're a paranorm," he said gratingly. "One of the monsters we had to fight—exterminate—to save ourselves."

"But have *I* ever done anything?"

"Not as far as I know," he admitted grudgingly.

"Well?"

When he replied he was arguing as much with himself as with her. "It's what your people did that counts. Worming into positions of power all over the world so they could start a war and then, when everybody was weakened by it, trying to take over, be dictators—"

"That isn't true," she said passionately. "We hate war and don't want to dictate to anybody. But your peace was nothing but a precarious balance of power that the least little incident would have sent toppling. Some of us pushed ourselves into ruling positions so that we could establish a real peace."

If she had limited her pleading to her own personal defense she might have stood a chance with him. He was in love with her, and would have wanted desperately to believe what she was saying. But that she should try to excuse the whole of her race was too much.

ALL the old hate, so assiduously cultivated in him by newspaper and video during those three grim years, flared up.

"A real peace!" he said scornfully. "Yes—the peace that slaves or cattle get. It's no use, Mary. If we leave even a few of you alive you'll be—be like a wedge, trying all the time to split our civilization wide open again so that you can get power."

She was crying again, out of sight behind the barrier of tumbled steel. He sat in his chair, crushing all the instinctive reactions that the sound called up, clinging grimly to his rage. He heard the soft swish as she teleported back along the airshaft.

The jangling emotions inside him killed his desire for eating. That was why it was some time before he discovered that she was apporting the food concentrates out of the store. And when he did find out there was nothing he could do about it.

Parasteel could stop them from teleporting. But apporting—the plucking to themselves of material things out of locked boxes, out of anywhere—required less energy. And anyway the concentrates were small and light, easy to handle. Water would be even easier though of course she couldn't take the converter.

By evening, or what would have been evening if they had been on Earth, all his food was gone and she was stocked up for months.

The fact that she had made an overt move against him, even so slight a one, made it easier for him to keep a grip on the thought of duty, to crush down the sentiments that might have weakened him. And it brought an idea as to how the thing that had to be done might be accomplished.

For all their powers paranorms had this much in common with ordinary humanity—there were three things that they had to have, to stay alive. And one of those three he might be able to take away from Mary.

When the idea came to him he called himself a fool for not having thought of it at first, for not having run to the control-chamber instead of the cabin. But there was no use regretting that. The only thing to do was to wait patiently for his chance.

Fortunately the little medical store was in the cabin. He went to it, took out three antisleep tablets and swallowed them with a draft of water. Briefly he wondered if it were possible for a paranorm to outlast him, even though he was assisted by drugs. Did the creatures need sleep?

Of course they did. Hadn't he seen Mary with her dark curls tumbled over the white pillow, her face gently flushed,

her soft inviting lips half parted as she breathed? To hell with it. The point was—how was he going to know when she was asleep now?

It was easier than he expected. Above the door of the cabin a small rack hung on the wall, fastened with grub screws that sank right through the depth of the metal. The peephole left when he removed one of the screws gave him only a limited view of the corridor outside. But it was enough.

Mary, either with the idea of keeping a watch on him or because she still felt a desire for his company, had dragged a lounge chair from the transparent-walled view-chamber at the rear of the ship. Now, a half-a-dozen yards away from the cabin door—but luckily on the side farthest away from the control chamber—she was lying back in the chair, her eyes closed.

"I'll watch her carefully," he thought. "Meanwhile I'd better try not to think about what I'm going to do in case she takes a fancy to probe my thoughts."

IT was three o'clock in the morning, Earth-time, when he decided that he needn't have bothered with the anti-sleep tablets, that he was reasonably safe. Mary had been still for some hours except for an occasional restless stirring. And by putting his ear to the screw-hole he had been able to hear the sound of her deep breathing.

He reached the control-chamber, creeping on shoeless feet, without disturbing her. Swiftly he locked the door behind him and began to turn valves.

Intended only for use in an emergency the things were stiff from disuse. For a moment he thought they were not going to work and cursed himself for neglecting the frequent oiling so strongly recommended in the maker's handbook. Then he got them to move, hermetically sealing the control-chamber, opening locks through the rest of the ship and letting the air go swishing out.

He had a brief sickening vision of Mary like one of those bodies he had seen in the war, bloated, purple, flecked with blood about the nostrils and ears. And then, transmitted by the metal floor, there came the sound of a soft scuffle outside the door.

He leaped across the chamber. The door had a transparent inset about five feet from the floor. Through it he could see Mary. Over her head, half veiling her features, was a soft transparent-white covering.

Ectoplasm, he thought grimly. Well, he had enough knowledge of that stuff to know that it wasn't very permanent. Her impromptu space-helmet wouldn't last long.

All the same he wished she hadn't been able to do it. It would only make her end a lingering one and he hated the thought of that.

Her words came to him, not as sound this time, but directly into his mind. "Jim. Let me in, please."

"No!"

"Very well."

She stepped forward. The door might as well not have been there. He stared at her, standing in front of him inside the control-chamber. "You—you could have got at me any time!" he croaked.

"Yes, Jim. I could have got at you any time."

Her eyes caught his, exerted compulsion, drove him back to sink into the pilot's chair. Invisible impalpable bonds locked him there.

"Now, Jim, I'm going to teach you a lesson. Watch the speed gauges."

He did as she told him, at first in sullen obedience, then in stark amazement. The gauges were calibrated to show speeds far above those safe for a ship of this size. And their needles had gone up and up, to jam hard against the stop by the highest figure.

"But we're not rocketing," he objected.

"That's right. We're not rocketing. Now look through the space-viewing ports."

The sight that greeted his eyes was this time too starkly unimaginable for

credence. The very stars were crawling out of place, speeding until they became white streaks.

"I don't believe it," he said hoarsely. "It's some sort of trick."

She smiled gently. "Teleporting a mass the size of this ship isn't difficult. And there's no limit to the speed attainable by teleporting."

His stunned mind struggled with the implications of it. "We must be going at more than light speed. But if you paranorms can do that, why did you lose the war?"

"Ask yourself that."

His thoughts went back, to queer inconsistencies that had troubled his mind slightly even when he had been a loyal fighter in the Space Navy. Inconsistencies might be easily explicable now.

"I often wondered why there were no major land battles," he said slowly. "They told us it was because there were so few paranorms, that they had all fled to space at the first alarm. But—"

"We had to break out through the Navy's blockade so that we could get our endangered members home," she said softly. "We killed as few of you as possible."

"Home? You're not natives of Earth?"

"No."

The sheer irrationality of that irritated him. "But that's nonsense. Living conditions are so different on other planets that evolution could never produce similar life forms on any two of them."

"That's true, Jim. But wait till we get to where we are going and you'll understand."

THE stars outside were figure dancers now, whirling and pirouetting, breaking up their formations, clustering into others as the angle of the constellations varied. His brain grew dizzy trying to make even a rough guess at their speed.

"Mightn't we hit something?" he asked.

"We have—quite a number of things."

He nodded his understanding of that. They had hit in the same way that she had hit the control chamber door.

"Where are we going?"

"I'm not allowed to tell you that. In fact"—she hesitated—"in fact, Jim, I'm breaking the laws of my people even by what I'm doing now. But I do so want you to understand."

They approached the planet so rapidly that it did not appear to grow before them but rather to flick into existence. She halted the ship, left it hovering in a high-riding mass of clouds that would hide it from any casual observer. Then she turned on the teleports so that he could scan the surface below.

It was a world much like Earth except that so far as he could judge the climate was more equable. But it was not that which caught his attention. There were cities down there—cities such as the architects of Earth dreamed of occasionally in their moments of highest inspiration.

Places of light, of clean-cut flowing lines, of gracious beauty in every smallest detail that blended perfectly into gracious beauty in the whole. And outside the cities the countryside was tamed by engineering projects breathtaking in their daring ingenuity, awe-inspiring in the vastness of their scope.

The people in city and countryside looked human—except that they teleported everywhere and smiled and laughed at each other but never once opened their mouths to speak.

Both place and people seemed to breathe a spirit of kindliness, of sweetly sane and civilized living in which the ideas of killing and conquest would be held horrible. And in the man's mind logic reinforced that impression.

If people such as these had ever come teleporting across the starways to conquer Earth, then Earth would have been conquered and the whole proud Space Navy no more effective than a buzzing gnat to stop it.

Jim shook his head. "I don't understand. This is the world of the paranorms but—"

She interrupted him with a smile. "This is *a* world—one of many—belonging to the norms."

"The norms?"

She nodded. "There are no paranorms, Jim. Only norms and"—she said it apologetically—"and subnorms."

He sat looking at her, waiting for her to go on.

"You stated yourself that nature could not produce two human races separately on two planets," she said. "That means that either our kind traveled across the light years to populate your world or your kind came here. Which is the more likely?"

He answered the question indirectly. "Why did you colonize Earth?"

She laughed gently. "We didn't do it voluntarily. Surely that should be obvious. But a million years ago our mastery of teleportion was not as great as it is today. A small exploring party went out once and lost their way. Somehow they crashed on Earth, injuring themselves so that they couldn't get away."

"But if they had children surely they—"

She shook her head. "For some reason we are not quite sure about—perhaps an inimical radiation that your Sun gave off in those days—their descendants began to degenerate. By the time we found them their powers had grown feeble and they had forgotten their old civilization except for some dim legends about a heavenly land that lay beyond the sky."

HE STRUGGLED with the idea, pride driving him to reject it, the inexorable facts forcing him to accept. While he thought, she lifted the ship, set it in the path for home.

"We mustn't stay too long," she explained. "I should be punished if we were discovered."

"Why?" he questioned. "Why have you people kept all this secret? Why haven't you told the whole world?"

"Your world isn't yet fit for the knowledge. There are still too many who see glory in conquest. We could defeat them, of course, but we'd rather not have to. And anyway we are not sure what undesirable psychological effects might be caused by a sudden revelation to your people of their own inferiority."

"But surely you could have told me?"

"Could I, Jim?"

He gave a twisted grin, deriding himself. "No, I suppose not. I was too much of a pig-headed fool. But—why did you marry me at all?"

"Because I loved you." She chuckled. "Trite, isn't it? But true. We believe in affinities. And when a woman has found her affinity we don't think it any shame for her to mate with him, even if it should mean that she has to take a less active part in the work."

"The work?" he seized on that for a further question. "What work? What were your people doing on Earth?"

"We came to teach you—to lead you unobtrusively—and to mate with you, so that the old blood would be bred back into you and your descendants become fit to join the race again."

He thought it over for a long, long while. And then he said huskily, "Is there any way I can help?"

She smiled in quick delight, and crossed to him. "Oh, Jim, my sweet, I'm so glad you said that—so very glad! There are plenty of ways in which you can help."

She pulled his face close to hers. Outside their ports, the stars gyrated swiftly. Twenty miles away from their stationary ship, in the only habitable cabin of a battered wreck, the few gaunt survivors of the nearly exterminated paranorms crouched. They were sweating mightily over the longest and most complicated visual hallucination they had ever produced.

To them she telepathed one brief message. "Congrats, boys. The sap's fallen for it. We're in again."

Third Alternative

By SAM MERWIN, JR.

There are odd, fatal differences—even in parallel worlds

THE arrogant amiability of Gerald Wister was amputated as by a surgeon's knife when he saw the man who could not be Bradford Lanning round a corner of the Hotel Castleford Lobby and vanish. The easy walk, the set of his shoulders, that profile briefly glimpsed—all were Lanning's.

But Bradford Lanning had been dead for three years — and it was Gerald Wister who had arranged the matter. His stomach curled like an oyster in alcohol.

Acting on reflexes Wister brought out cigarette-case and lighter, discovered his fingers were shaking. He squared his

shoulders, inhaled deeply, lit his smoke. It was, of course, ridiculous. The man who had rounded the corner ahead of him merely *looked* like Brad, merely *walked* like Brad, merely. . . .

Carefully he wrapped himself in a simulation of his previous mood of well-being. Then he walked deliberately through the lobby to the cocktail lounge, where Corinne Weir awaited him at a table. But his eyes were questing, wary, as he moved.

Clear-eyed Corinne looked up at him with obvious concern. "What's the matter, Gerry?" she asked softly. "Seen a ghost?"

Wister felt the allusion unfortunate. In a way, he supposed, he *had* seen a ghost, even though it had been a creation of his own deep-buried guilt. He laughed a trifle shakily, murmured something about having hurried too fast to reach the Castleford on time.

"Surely a novelty — but flattering," said Corinne, smiling.

"Oh come, I always *try* to be prompt," Wister told her, "especially with you." He wished, not for the first time, that Corinne were not so completely devoted to the memory of the fiancé whose death he had arranged.

"But you're such a *busy* man of affairs," she said. Wister thought he detected mockery in her voice. He shrugged it off, ordered a double-Gibson, very dry. He needed one.

"You ought to take a rest, Gerry," said Regan Konetowsky, who occupied the third chair at the table. "No man can drive himself forever as you do." He spoke with a trace of foreign accent.

"It's no drive, Regan," replied Wister. "It's somewhere between a five-iron and a putt." He winced at his own corny gag.

"Missed putts have lost many championships," said Konetowsky owlishly. He was shading forty and to Wister it was incredible that he should have accomplished so much in so many fields of science. Already he was mentioned with —well, if not with Einstein, then with Fermi, Oppenheimer and the rest. There were whispers of a Nobel award, withheld only because of his youth.

"You should talk," growled Wister and the scientist laughed, absurdly young despite his pepper-and-salt hair. Wister glanced obliquely at Corinne, wondered whether the relationship between them still rested within the bounds of friendship and professional give-and-take.

HE HAD seen to it that Corinne need never work. This obligation he'd have undertaken even had he not been responsible for her fiancé's death. But Corinne had elected to immerse herself in science, had ultimately become Regan Konetowsky's assistant. She would, he thought, fulfill her purpose far better as a rich man's wife—say his own.

He downed his drink and said, "Incidentally, what's the occasion? You were mighty mysterious over the phone, Corinne."

"Oh—Regan's just finished his most important experiment," she replied, regarding Regan proudly. "We felt a celebration in order and decided to count you in."

"Indirectly you had much to do with our success," the scientist stated. Then, when Wister's eyebrows rose, "Corinne has been invaluable. If you hadn't managed her affairs so wisely she would not have been able to take the courses that enabled her to show me so many short cuts."

"Bushwah, Brain," said the girl, wrinkling her nose charmingly. "Why, if it hadn't been for . . ."

She talked on, but Wister heard nothing. His attention was caught by a wall mirror that offered a narrow view of the men's bar beyond a row of potted palms. In it he saw Bradford Lanning lift a glass to his lips. As he stared, incredulous, the man he had had slain three years before smiled, gestured a silent toast.

"Something wrong, Gerry?" Konetowsky's sharp question brought him

back to immediate awareness. He looked down, saw his cocktail glass lying on its side on the tablecloth in a widening stain.

"I guess I'm *not* quite up to par," he said. He rose, tried to smile. "Please excuse me—I'll run along home." He gripped his chairback tightly lest he sway in a faint.

He raced through the lobby, ignoring the stares of the curious, cut around to the men's bar, wormed his way rudely through the crowd of imbibers to the far end, where the ghost of Bradford Lanning—if it *had* been a ghost—stood and mocked him silently.

But no one was there—no one who looked even faintly like Lanning. The bartender could not help him—too many people, too many orders. Frustrated, Wister checked the mirror, saw Corinne and the scientist still at the table, heads close together. Slowly he turned away, walked out of the hotel.

The following day, while strolling back from his luncheon club to the offices on whose door his name stood alone, Wister saw Bradford Lanning again. This time the ghost was buying a paper from the newsdealer across the street. When Wister stopped, his former partner seemed to sense his presence. At any rate he turned, smiled, lifted his paper in cheery salute.

Wister fled back to his office, mopped icy sweat from his brow, ordered his receptionist to admit no one to see him. He passed the entire afternoon — between trips to his portable bar—staring out the big picture window at the shipping in the upper bay, taking stock of himself. He was far from satisfied with his findings.

It had not been an emotional murder. Any emotion involved had belonged to the corpse — if Lanning were still a corpse. They had been partners, the two of them, in an investment business largely financed by Lanning's fat inheritance from a rich uncle. Earlier they had been roommates in school and college.

During World War Two Lanning had served with the Marines in the Pacific. Wister, thanks to a game leg acquired in a salad-day automobile crackup, had stayed home and minded the business, had quadrupled its capital, quintupled its markets and clients. Foreseeing V-J Day he had put it on a sound peacetime footing ahead of most of their competitors. Lanning should have been grateful.

But the Corps had invalidated Brad as a businessman. It had firmed his youthful idealism, deep-frozen his moral flexibility beyond reason. Certainly Wister had indulged in behind-the-scenes fixing when priorities made legitimate deals impossible. It had been a matter of do business or go under—and he had had not the slightest intention of going under.

He had been scrupulously honest in dividing the profits—but Brad had been utterly unreasonable on his return. He had dug out the grey-and-black-market deals, the specification shortcomings, the "gifts" to officials. When Wister had pointed out that exposure could mean prison for them both, Brad had insisted he preferred prison to profits piled up at the cost of blood shed by his Marine Corps comrades.

Reluctantly Wister had done what had to be done—he had even wept when the police asked him, along with Corinne, to visit the morgue and identify the remains. A shotgun, fired at close range, had destroyed most of the head — and when the killers, as ordered, set fire to car and corpse alike they had destroyed the fingerprints. But Brad's dentist had been able to make identification.

NOW Wister felt crowded with doubts The dentist *could* have been wrong honestly or otherwise. Unlikely, but al the same . . . And Wister could hardly check on the gunmen without risking all sorts of future shakedowns. No, he was going to have to go along on the assumption that the man he had had killed was his former partner.

Which left another alternative—that

he was going mad. Wister, who prided himself on his ability to face reality, took this possibility in stride. He could hardly consult a psychiatrist — a psychiatrist was of small use to anyone who withheld facts and Wister was hardly in position to tell the truth. Furthermore a clever one might mine the truth through adroit questioning.

Perforce he had to let things ride. He went about his business as usual the next day and, when Lanning failed to reappear, regained a near-normal stride, even swung a highly profitable deal.

It was late in the third day, as he left the office en route to a discreetly orgiastic celebration of this success, that the phantom Lanning reentered his life. Wister was working his way through the rush-hour crowd toward the spot where his chauffeur waited.

"Nice going, Gerry." The voice, from behind him, was Lanning's—beyond all doubt. Lanning was back, he was here, he. . . .

In the grip of panic Wister's resolution hardened. There was a third alternative open to him. He could pursue this phantom, if phantom it were, run it to earth, bury it—if need be see that it was laid to rest with a silver bullet in its heart.

This resolution must have been growing within him since his first encounter with the spectre in the hotel lobby—for he acted swiftly, without fear. He did wonder how the phantom had known of his successful deal — from that, "Nice going, Gerry," it must have. But Wister, pushed to the wall, was striking back. He had no time for such speculation.

He pivoted in time to see his former partner—a faint well-remembered smile on his lips—melt into the crowd. Lanning wore the uniform of the business district — chesterfield, grey homborg, pigskin gloves. But Wister knew his walk, the set of his shoulders. He followed his victim unerringly, forgetting the lush and immoral young creature awaiting him uptown in a certain hotel suite.

Shadowing Lanning proved unexpectedly easy. He kept roughly a hundred feet behind his quarry, let the shoals of emerging office workers provide him with cover. So intent was he that he failed to note or reply to the greetings of men who knew him.

They left the financial district, moved east along shabbier, emptier streets. Where had a generation before been the mansions of the wealthy were now ragged tenements. Unemptied refuse cans lined the sidewalks, runny-nosed urchins played beneath rusty fire-escapes.

On the lip of a dust-mantled park the ghost turned south, headed into a warehouse area. It turned left around a corner and, when its pursuer followed, had vanished. But the door of a battered edifice swung gently in the rimy chill of the grey winter twilight.

Wister paused there, uneasily considered a trap. Why, he wondered, should ghost or man permit itself to be run to earth in such a place? But he did not hesitate long. The urgencies that had brought him thus far refused to be denied. Squaring heavy shoulders, he pushed on through into the building.

It was a dim cavernous place. His footsteps echoed emptily from the concrete. He paused again, heard unhurried steps ahead in the gloom, checked their direction, followed rápidly, as silently as he could.

Light flared suddenly before him, revealing the door to a room filled with thick smoke. Wister ran toward it as he saw the shadow of his quarry vanish into it. Recklessly he plunged after him, from deep twilight into what might have been sun-drenched fog.

HE STUMBLED over a shallow step, found himself in a street behind the warehouse—in a very different part of town. For a moment he stood blinking, wondering. He thought of the Williamsburg restoration. Here was the city as it must have looked half a century before his birth.

By the streetlights, which had come on while he was in the warehouse, it was neat, obviously a district of folk with means and taste. The sidewalks were evenly laid, the brick fronts of the old houses trim, their shutters neatly painted. At irregular intervals a polished brass door-knocker or doorplate or footscraper caught a highlight from the nearest streetlamp.

Wister, who had not heard of any such restoration project, wondered who had put up the money. Glancing backward, he found reassurance in the skyscrapers that raised twinkling tiers high in the darkening heavens. Then, returning to the matter at hand, he saw Lanning turn into a house in the next block. He gave chase, calling his ex-partner's name.

"Yes—you want me?" Lanning's voice was polite, surprised.

"*Brad!*" cried Wister, panting up to his quarry. By the light from the house he saw that it was indeed Lanning—if slightly older than his memory of the man. After all, it had been three years.

"I thought you were dead," he babbled. "What's the idea of ducking me?" He thought no more of ghosts — this was Brad in the flesh. The half-smile on his face was proof enough for Wister.

"Perhaps I preferred it that way," said the man officially dead. "But since you've finally found me, come on in, Gerry. You might as well see the rest of it."

Wister saw a fine old city mansion with fine white paneling and wainscoats, fine old furniture, prints and mirrors, fine old carpets underfoot. He thought of his own expensively "decorated" apartment uptown and envied Lanning his home.

"As I recall it you like bourbon straight," said Lanning as he lifted a crystal decanter from a sideboard Wister recognized as genuine Sheraton. "I think you'll like this, Gerry. Martha's great-grandfather had it laid down almost a century ago."

"Martha?" Wister blinked. Who, he wondered, was Martha? And what motives lay behind Lanning's withdrawal into this odd old-world corner in the downtown heart of the city?

He got his first answer quickly. A handsome woman, willowy and chic although she must have been in her late thirties, entered, gave Lanning a fond buss and said, "I've got Gillie in bed with his Teddy Bear and a croup kettle. The twins are having a pillow-fight. I wish you'd go upstairs and calm them down, darling."

"Right," said Lanning. "Excuse me, Gerry. This is my wife, Martha—Gerry Wister. You've heard me speak of him."

A flash of something—fear?—crossed Martha Lanning's well-bred features. Then she was smiling, pouring a drink, telling him he must stay for dinner, that it was a shame the way Brad had let old friendships lapse since their marriage.

"I'd love to — thanks," said Wister. So Brad had been hiding a wife all the time he was engaged to Corinne! No wonder he had seized the chance to vanish. He must have arranged the substitution with his assassins, rigged a deal with the dentist.

THE bourbon flowed smoothly down Wister's throat to expand in pleasant warmth. Brad, he decided, had it very good indeed. Martha, for instance—no show-stopper, perhaps, but with style, charm, a quiet beauty that was bound to grow rather than pall with time. There was something oddly familiar about her —Wister tried to run it down, failed, suppressed a faint tremor of worry.

". . . and I'd love to have you see the children, but Gillie has a cold and it's *so* contagious this time of year." Martha Lanning talked amiably and aimlessly, after the fashion of wives the world over with unexpected guests for dinner.

"A pity," said Wister. He let her ramble on, tried to work it out—the unexpected house in the unexpected part of town, the unexpected wife and children —above all the strange familiarity of

the woman, the flash of emotion that had crossed her face when they were introduced. She was being a shade too trivial, too casual.

And the haunting of the past few days—that would take some explaining, explaining no mere hospitality could wipe from the agenda. He rose when Brad came downstairs, and Martha excused herself to warn the cook of a guest for dinner.

Wister bided his time through a well-served meal whose quality hinted that Brad was indeed doing himself well. Talk remained pleasant if desultory. Brad kept the ball rolling, chatting of his new life, ignoring the old. Martha grew increasingly nervous. She pecked at her food, excused herself with the coffee, with the plea that the children needed her.

There was heavy silence—silence Wister finally broke with, "Well, Brad, haven't we a few things we ought to discuss?"

"Right," said Brad, rising. "Let's get at it. I have a query or two myself." He led the way to a comfortable den at the rear of the house, containing leather easy chairs and sofa, a large desk. Bookcases lined two of the walls, a gun cabinet a third. A large window with drawn blind took up the remaining wall space.

"Still collecting firearms, Brad?" Wister inquired as he accepted a large inhaler of brandy from his host.

"I pick up a gun occasionally," said Lanning. "I still like to hunt. The guns in the lower shelf are oiled up."

Wister eyed the gleaming Belgian shotgun at the far end of the rack, debated doing the job himself when opportunity offered. This time there would be no question of survival for Lanning. But there were Martha, the servants—too many witnesses to his presence here. An alibi would be costly and difficult if not impossible.

SO IT would have to wait. He sipped his brandy, which was of incredible excellence, said, "All right, Brad—why have you been haunting me this past week?"

"Isn't 'haunting' rather an odd word, Gerry?"

"Hardly—under the circumstances. After all, Brad; you *are* officially dead."

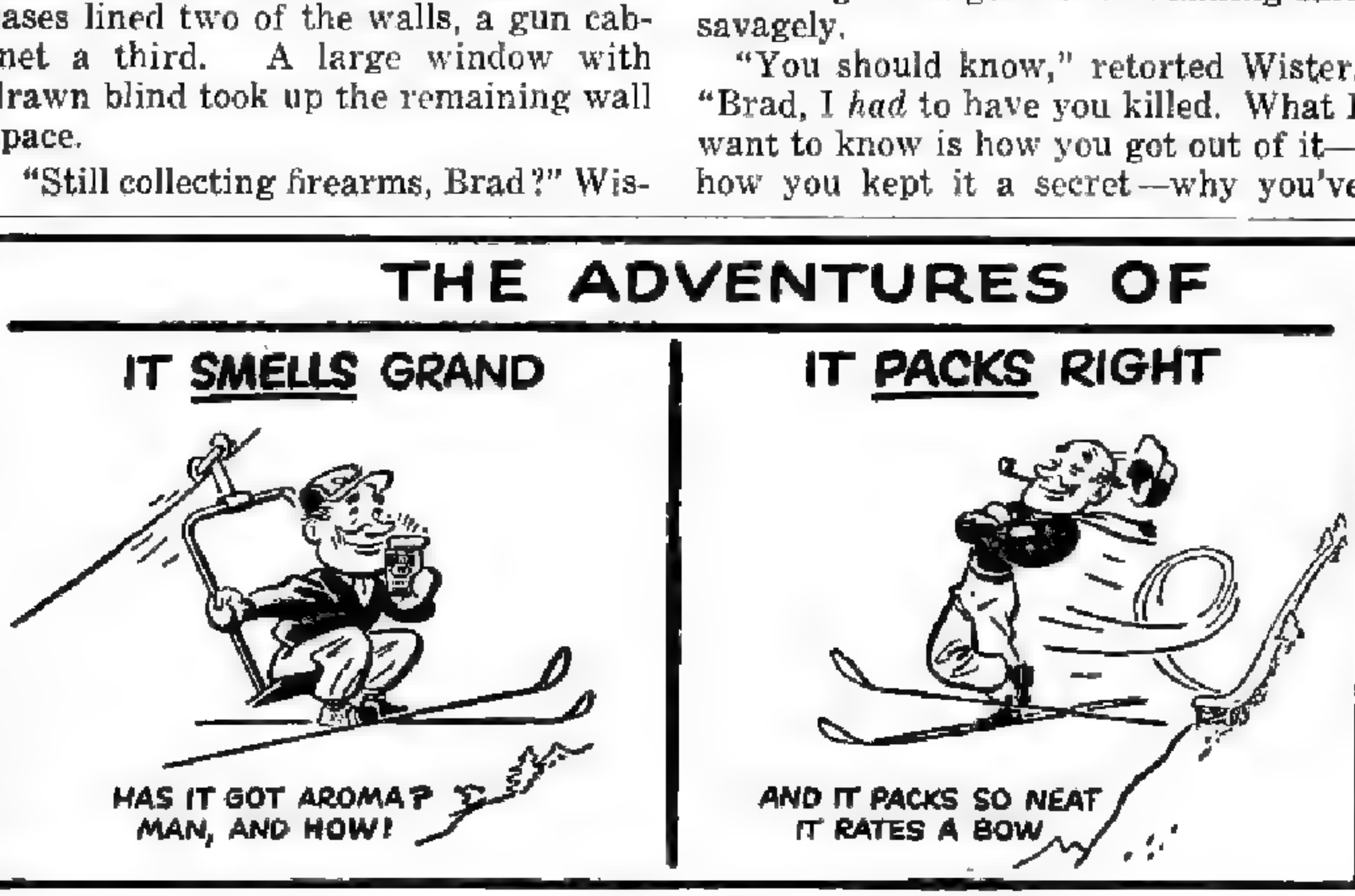
"Thanks to you," said Lanning bluntly. "Gerry, that was a damfool thing to do."

"Maybe," said Wister, "but look at it from my angle—what else *could* I do?"

"Using hired gunmen!" Lanning said savagely.

"You should know," retorted Wister. "Brad, I *had* to have you killed. What I want to know is how you got out of it—how you kept it a secret—why you've

THE ADVENTURES OF



been haunting me the last few days?"

"Thanks, Gerry," said Lanning. He pressed a button beneath the desk, added, "Your confession's all on tape." His smile was no longer amiable. "Now I'll answer your questions—gladly."

"Hold it!" Wister was on his feet, his whole body an alarm system. "Your murder has been a closed book for almost three years. You can't hope to reopen it now."

"*I* don't intend to," said Lanning quietly. "I've done this for Corinne Weir—since she and Dr. Konetowsky managed to get through."

"Get through?" asked Lanning, his throat dry.

"Yes—*through!*" replied Lanning. "When you followed me into the warehouse you entered a gateway between parallel worlds. Dr. Konetowsky stumbled onto it while working on hyperspace beams for high-speed communication in your world. They built the gateway, came through, found me. We—worked out a little campaign."

"You're crazy, Brad." Gerry Wister's voice was a croak.

"Am I? Take a look." Contemptuously Lanning tossed a newspaper from the desk. Wister caught it, studied it. At first glance it looked normal. Then he saw difference in masthead and headlines.

He dived for the financial page, scanned the listing. Many familiar initials were there—along with some absentees and strangers.

"You could have faked this," said Wister. Even to himself it rang false. There were too many discrepancies—Brad's resurrection, the strange part of the city, the children, Martha . . . Again he wondered about Martha, about her odd familiarity.

"I didn't," said Lanning. "I'm delivering your taped confession to Miss Weir tomorrow. I had to get you here to draw it out of you. You see, Miss Weir wants you punished for killing her fiancé."

"Then you *aren't* Bradford Lanning," cried Wister hoarsely.

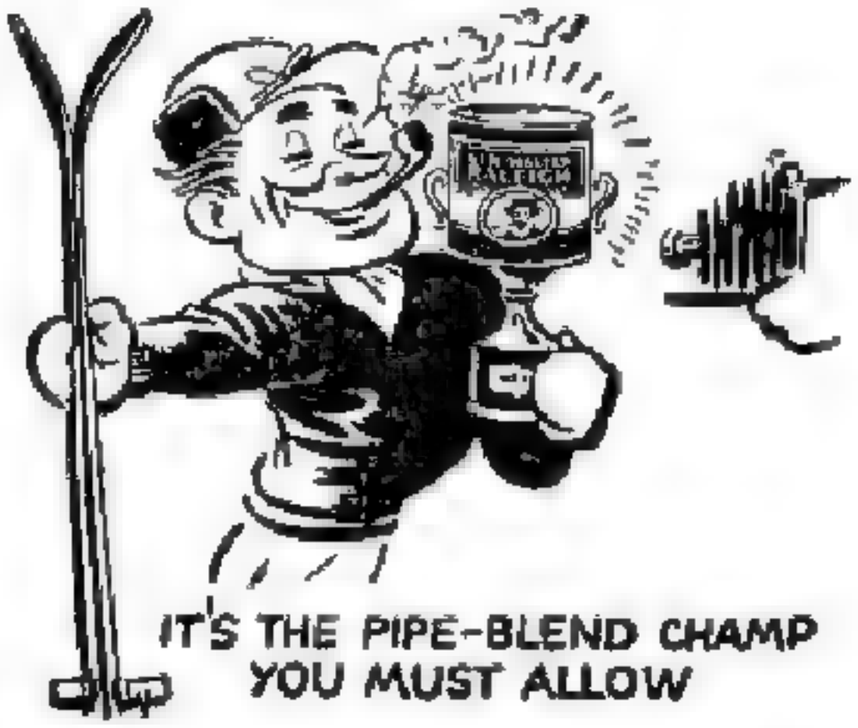
"I'm Lanning, all right," his host stated quietly. "I just don't happen to be the Lanning you killed. This is another world, one parallel to yours—the other side of the Mobius if you will. But when you go back you'll go to prison, never fear. You may even die—though this is unlikely in view of the attorneys you will hire."

"That crime is a closed book," said Wister. He took two cautious steps toward the gun cabinet. If he could eliminate this other Brad Lanning—and any other course was now unthinkable—he could get back, destroy the gateway, pre-

[*Turn page*]

UNCLE WALTER

IT SMOKES SWEET



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vent Konetowsky from building another. Gateway between worlds—parallel time-tracks—he could not yet quite believe it. But the A-bomb had taught him to respect scientific theory and its possible translation into fact.

"You've had it soft for years now," said Lanning, turning to pour another brandy. "Why not take your medicine?"

Lanning saw the shells in a box at the bottom of the guncase. He moved swiftly, silently—plucked out the shotgun, loaded it, aimed it almost in single motion. Lanning was just turning back toward him when Wister let him have both barrels.

THE gun emitting a duet of thin coughing sounds—Lanning stood staring at him, unharmed. Then, before Wister could recover from his shock, his host drew a heavy automatic pistol from the desk and calmly shot him through the foot.

"That," he said, "will hold you until I can get the police here."

He picked up the telephone, made the call. Then he sat on the desk, pistol in hand, and studied Lanning, who sat on the rug, crying and watching the blood spurt from his smashed bench-made boot. He added, "Martha will have to have the carpet cleaned."

Stung by his host's detachment and by his own anguish, Wister cried, "What good will your tape recording do you now?"

"Me? None, naturally," was the reply. "I didn't undertake this for profit. But it will explain your disappearance from your own world as a probable suicide. It will enable Corinne to have you declared legally dead, will let her claim a part of your fortune, which will legally be hers thanks to my late namesake's will."

"And how are you going to explain *me* in this world?" Wister asked, his face twisted with pain. He whimpered a little.

"You? Try not to make such a fuss, will you? You'll wake the children," said Lanning in reproof. "Why do I have to explain you? By the time the police get through questioning you you'll be meat for the nut-hatch, friend."

He paused, added, "You know nothing about this world, and your answers to some of their questions will put you in a padded cell, I'm afraid—especially when I tell them you crashed in here with a story of being an old friend of a former business-associate and then tried to shoot me with my own shotgun. Naturally, knowing you as I do, I doctored the charges in those shells."

"Tell me one thing," pleaded Wister as heavy footsteps sounded in the hall behind the closed door. "*How* did you know so much about me? How did you learn about my deal this afternoon?"

"Brace yourself," replied Lanning. "It may be a bit of a shock." He moved toward the door as a hard knock sounded, adding, "I knew you well enough to see that you felt especially good this evening. It was in your expression, your walk, a lot of little things."

"But *how* did you know?" repeated the wounded man.

"There are differences, friend, even in parallel worlds," his host told him. "In yours Lanning was your partner, you had him killed. In mine things worked out differently—and a whole lot better. The partnership isn't the same here. I *married* you. For in this world you were born a girl."

He opened the door, admitted the police. "Do what you can for this poor crazy devil," he told them. "He seems to have fainted."

Read THE WELL OF THE WORLDS, a brilliant new complete novel by Henry Kuttner in March STARTLING STORIES—on sale at all stands, 25c per copy! Now published monthly!

MEN on MARS

Radioman Willie couldn't shoot straight, but he was on the beam!

PAST Kruts' shoulder he could see four men plodding slowly nearer across the distant plain, where the rocket ship lay stranded like a silver whale. He wished they would hurry.

"But what do you want to learn for?" Kruts was saying. "You can't shoot. You're just another radioman, that's all. You're holding that rifle as if it was going to bite you. Oh hell, try again if you want to."

He tried again, loading, aiming, firing and gasping in the thin Martian air, until Kruts said, "Look, Willie, why don't you give up, for God's sake? Go twirl those blasted radio dials of yours—

By LAURENCE MANNING

that's something you *can* do."

"I'm sorry to be so slow, Kruts."

"Skip it. Save your breath for climbing."

He pointed to the steep slope that dropped to the canyon floor, a thousand feet below. On the left the canyon opened into a wide circular valley; on the right it ran for miles, straight and narrow through the flat Martian uplands. They had spent that morning walking along its rim to the far end—out on the other side and back on this. Now they were going to descend, cross and climb the opposite slope to their starting point, with an armed party from the ship waiting to meet them.

Fifty feet away, perched on a boulder, Lieutenant Joliffe was brooding over his notebook. Kruts was studying the scene below. Willie fidgeted, stared at the distant figures. sighed impatiently, said, "Gee, I wish they'd hurry up—I can hardly wait."

The first men on Mars! It felt great to Willie. But DeVoe and Dr. Wilson were the lucky ones. The station was going to be over in the valley. They'd have five years to explore it all! They'd have a little farm—even chickens. The eggs had started to hatch already and Stockton in the ship's supply office wanted to know if the skipper thought he had signed on as a farmer. There'd be a regular little settlement.

Kruts grunted, his eyes still intent on the canyon. "It'll be nice company for Smith's ghost," he said at last.

"Oh—I didn't hear what happened."

"He climbed down there yesterday afternoon like a damn fool. He never came back."

"Didn't they send a search party?"

"Yeh. We're it. There's nothing hasty about the skipper."

Willie stared down at the canyon. The only creatures visible were about the size of goats in scattered groups, peacefully nibbling at the vegetation, green now in the Martian spring.

"But what could happen to him? What's down there to be afraid of?"

"If I knew I wouldn't be afraid of it."

Kruts stiffened, stared and shouted, "See it, Lieutenant? Near the far side, small and fast—gone now, sir."

Lieutenant Joliffe came out of his meditations with a start and grabbed his binoculars. Willie whispered, "He wasn't on the ball that time, was he?"

"Don't worry about him. *He* can shoot," answered Kruts from the side of his mouth. Then called out abruptly: "At the mouth of the canyon—another one—going away from us, Lieutenant!"

WILLIE caught only a glimpse of distant movement that vanished into the masking greenery below. He set himself to watch but it was many minutes before anything happened. Then the nearest group of animals, browsing right below them, burst into sudden flight.

Something small and black flashed among the shrubbery in pursuit. In a few seconds it overtook one and seemed to flatten out in a curious manner, almost to wrap itself around its prey. Both fell out of sight behind the vegetation.

The Lieutenant climbed off his rock and walked over to them. "Well, Kruts," he said, "you won't have time for a second shot at that—whatever it is. I can't make it out at all. The herbivorae are about what you might expect, long thin legs and a big chest—Look out, man! Climbing up your boot!"

Kruts said, "Those damn tiger-bugs!" He slapped, then brushed the sticky mess away.

The Lieutenant nodded and said, "They can bite! One took a chunk out of me yesterday an eighth of an inch across." He held up a bandaged thumb. "I can't seem to classify them either. Two antennae, but definitely not insects —only one body segment and twelve legs. I don't even know what they live on. There are no animals up here and they don't seem to eat vegetation . . ." His voice trailed off and he stood stroking his chin thoughtfully.

Willie saw that the men had reached

the opposite crest at last. He coughed suggestively and the Lieutenant looked up, nodded and gave the word to start.

It was a tough climb down. At the bottom they paused to get their breath. The shrubs turned out to be just too high to see over. Though spaced well apart, the vistas between were irregular and confusing.

In a low voice the Lieutenant gave his orders, "Thorgess, you will lead. Kruts and I will cover you. Go slow and keep your eyes open."

Willie started, trying to keep a straight course as he wound in and out between the clumps. Each bush he passed with a little shiver—no telling what was hiding behind its grass-like leaves. It was utterly quiet. Feet made no sound in the thick dust that covered the ground but he could tell the others were behind him by the sound of their breathing. He heard Kruts whisper, "This walking blind is not good."

There was something white lying on the ground—a skeleton. He stepped over it, eyes probing the leafy corridors ahead. He paused a moment and heard the Lieutenant mutter, "No vertebrae, just one big bone-plate! Why, it's a whole new class! Good!"

Kruts said, "Not so good, sir. What kind of a thing kills and eats its prey without tearing off so much as a leg?"

Willie led on, his rifle hugged to his armpit as Kruts had told him. He nearly took a shot at a pile of gray boulders between the shrubs ahead. He gasped at the thought of such a blunder and hoped Kruts would think the sudden movement of his gun had been only alertness.

The Lieutenant whispered, "Climb up, Thorgess. Maybe we can see something from up there." He and Kruts waited, rifles ready, while Willie got up, then joined him. Together they peered cautiously over the top.

Not fifty feet off two animals stood eating. If you could call it eating, thought Willie. Each tore off a mouthful of leaves, munched it, spit it out again on the ground, nuzzled it, to suck up the wet cud with an audible schloop and gulp it down at last. Each had a horn about six inches long in the middle of its forehead. They scuttled out of sight just as Kruts was cautiously getting his rifle into position for a shot.

Something fast and quiet was running among the shrubs close by. Then it flashed into view, small and black, and was gone again. But in that instant Kruts' rifle had fired. It was hit but its pace had not even faltered. Willie shut unbelieving eyes to recapture the brief image.

Four legs rising to a big lump of muscle—that was all. No head, not even a real body. Just a lump where the legs joined together like the arched back of a black cat that had no head or tail. Or like a man cut off at the waist whose legs ran around by themselves—like nothing Willie had ever seen in real life.

"That bullet would stop an elephant but not that little beggar. Now what do we do?" said Kruts.

Willie had been staring across the canyon and interrupted, "The ship's party has started over toward us. They'll run slap into that thing."

There were a fusillade of shots and sounds of distant shouting. Then three figures were climbing hastily up the far slope, making extraordinary motions as though dancing and slapping themselves. Partway up they stopped and began shooting at something hidden below them.

"There's only three of them," said Willie. "Why did they leave the other man?"

"Probably because he's dead," barked Kruts.

The Lieutenant got quickly to his feet. "We have to cross the canyon some time. If we do it now we may be able to help —come on, men!"

IT came at them from behind the tenth clump of shrubbery, swift and sudden. All three fired. Two holes gaped but it kept on coming and was almost at their

feet when it fell. Five separate pieces, not one body, tumbled to the ground. Each piece as it struck broke into hundreds of tiny individuals that wriggled in separate life. The ground was covered with a writhing mound of tiger-bugs!

At once, while they stared stupefied, the parts began to reassemble. The small creatures clung to each other to make lumps and strands of tissue. Legs formed and began to join and raise themselves off the ground again. The weird resurrection was nearly complete when Kruts put three bullets, one after another, into the mass. A few tiger-bugs were knocked out but the structure did not fall entirely apart this time. "Back to the rocks!" shouted the Lieutenant.

The unkillable thing was in swift pursuit before they got there. Kruts whirled to pump bullets into it. It fell, splashing tiger-bugs on his boots. Then he followed the others up the rocks, slapping himself and cursing.

Willie said, "Hold still a minute, Kruts," and squashed one in the middle of his back.

Their pursuer was running again by now but not toward them. It went around and around the rock pile, veering away when it came too near. The Lieutenant said "Oh-oh! Here comes another." They waited, rifles ready. But the second one also raced in a circle, also avoided coming close to the rocks. After a minute Willie gave a gasp of relief.

"Looks like maybe we're safe up here. Whew! That was close."

"Yes, Thorgess," said the Lieutenant, "it does look that way. Now why should it? Why do they keep away from the rocks?"

Then he added, "Give Kruts a hand with that bandage on his shoulder." He watched a minute. "Those bites must hurt like the devil, Kruts. I'll have to report you unfit for duty. The Captain will have to know about all this anyway. Get the ship on the radio, Thorgess."

When the report had been made, Willie could hear the faint tinny voice of the skipper in the earphone and caught the last words ". . . sweat it out where you are while I think it over awhile, Lieutenant."

For an hour nothing happened, hardly anything was said. Kruts was swearing to himself as he tried to find a comfortable position to rest in. The Lieutenant was alternately looking through his glasses and writing in his notebook. Willie watched the circling horrors.

There were at least five of them at various locations in the canyon. The horned browsers had more speed than he had first thought. Though put to flight eight times in the hour only one was caught. It fell in an open spot where he could watch the kill in detail. A black tide flower over it and its struggles ceased almost at once.

Then the tiger-bugs, gorged, began to leave, each carrying a piece of flesh in its jaws. They formed a procession, like a line of ants returning from a raid, marching toward the canyon wall on the left. Willie was shocked to see how quickly the carcass was stripped to its bare bones.

The Lieutenant had been watching too and muttered, "Marvelous! What organization! Bees or ants are nothing compared to them! Why, they swarm like slime-mold in a microscope!"

He put down his glasses and turned excitedly to Willie. "Don't you see the parallel?" he asked. "The slime-molds gather into a slug that crawls about like a true animal. After it culminates the cells go back to separate lives again. Why, this is almost the same thing on a larger scale!"

"Huh?" said Willie. He gulped. "I'm afraid I don't get you, sir."

Lieutenant Joliffe looked surprised, then grinned. "Sorry, Thorgess. I forgot where I was for a minute. I'm just beginning to understand the tiger-bugs a little—to classify them, that is. But how do they see to run so fast and straight? Where do they march to after they make a kill?"

(Turn to page 134)

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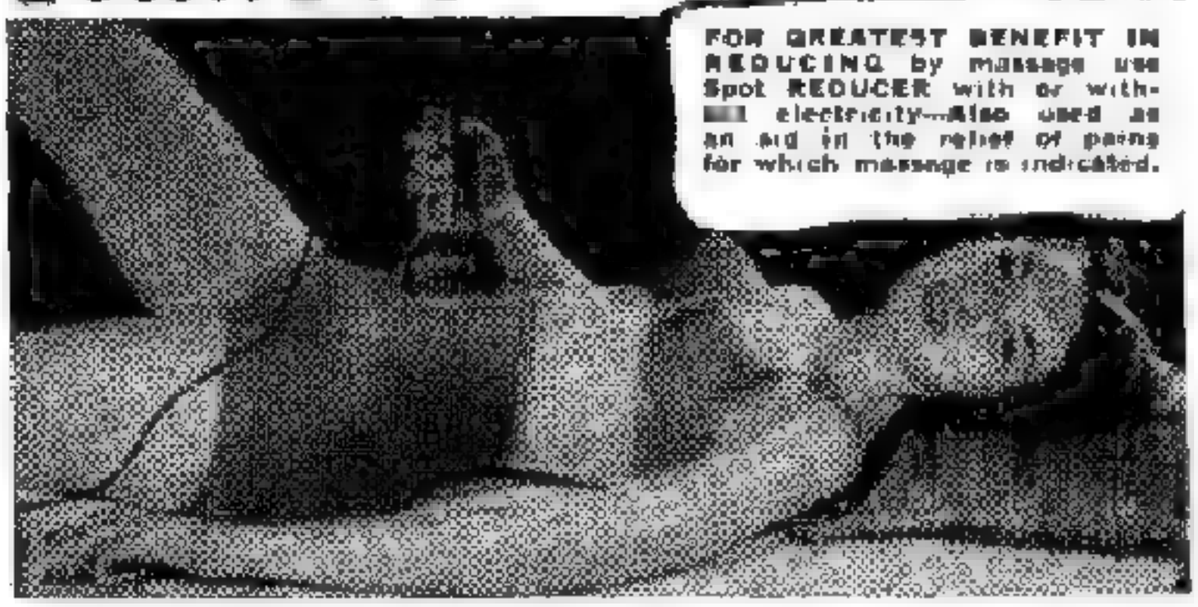

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"Why, I dunno, sir," answered Willie. "I just sort of thought they had a nest over there somewhere with maybe a queen in it."

The Lieutenant looked doubtful and said, "Could be." He turned to look at Kruts. "How is it with you now?" he asked.

The big man pressed his lips tight together and frowned. "The bites have stopped stinging but how long must we stay here? It will be damned cold when the sun sets."

"Let's hope the Captain gets us out of here before dark."

"He could make flame-throwers out of welding torches," grunted Kruts. "It would be easy to rig them up. Then burn every tiger-bug in the valley!"

The Lieutenant shook his head. "He'd never authorize that much oxygen. There is barely enough for the crew to breathe on the way home. There are some hand grenades though and a rocket mortar."

"The target is too swift," said Kruts. "They'd be useless, sir."

"But what," asked Willie, "what *can* the Captain do, then? If flame-throwers are the only things that will work. He'll just *have* to use some oxygen."

The Lieutenant looked at him thoughtfully. "Getting the ship back to earth is a bit more important than getting us back to the ship, Thorgess. This is your first voyage. You've never seen a space crew on oxygen rations, half of them unconscious, all with splitting headaches. It's quite an experience."

"It went to eighty below zero last night," said Kruts. "We have no shelter, no blankets. We can't stay here and live, sir."

ALL three men were silent. Willie felt an icy lump forming in his stomach though the afternoon sun was still warm.

"Get the ship on the radio," snapped the Lieutenant.

DeVoe's voice answered. Willie felt almost homesick as he pictured the radio room with its gleaming metal walls and the warm hum of the dynamo behind the cagework. He asked for the Captain and handed over the radio.

"Lieutenant Joliffe reporting, sir." Willie strained his ears to catch a few words of the Captain's answer.

"You are valuable members of this crew but your value is not infinite . . . I may fail to colonize—I shall not fail to return my ship safely . . . Good luck, Joliffe."

The lump of ice in Willie's stomach grew heavier and colder.

The Lieutenant cleared his throat. "We are on our own, men. Return to the ship as best we can—those are the orders. We will make a dash for it, each man for himself. No rescues, mind! Everyone will have an equal chance to get across."

"But we have no chance at all," Willie blurted out. "Surely they can do *something*, sir! Why wouldn't space-suits keep the bugs out?"

The Lieutenant studied him sternly but when he spoke his voice was gentle. "You have not been bitten, Thorgess. The rubber is too thin. They would bite right through it, probably get inside . . ." He frowned and stopped talking abruptly.

"Besides," put in Kruts, "you can't run in a space-suit." He turned to the Lieutenant. "Now?" he asked.

"Hm'm! The bugs are probably too torpid to move when it gets cold. At a guess we might be perfectly safe after dark."

Kruts said, "Who has a flashlight?" Nobody answered. He continued, "So we have no light. We won't find our way among the thickets. We'll slip and stumble—fall into holes or maybe walk right into one of those cattle things. Their horns could be very bad in the dark. Even if we reach the other side—how'll we climb up? There will be an inch of frost over everything."

"Yes," said the Lieutenant. "Well, those creatures must have some reaction to cold: They must associate it with

darkness. Just possibly they get under cover at the first hint of sunset—there's no dusk here, of course. Our best chance may be—say 17:30 Mars time. An hour and a half from now." He turned calmly to his binoculars and notebook.

Willie looked at him in a daze, then at Kruts, who was calming sleeping again. Didn't they realize that they would all be killed before the day ended? What real chance had even one man to get through those tireless circlers? The Lieutenant was taking notes for his book, eh? Well, some other biologist would write it! Some other men would go down in history as the first to settle Mars.

History! Why, there wouldn't have been any if a deadly thing like this had lived back on earth. It was bullet-proof—you couldn't even beat one to death with a club! He pictured himself trying to and shuddered. He looked at the distant valley, like a green mirage in the sunlight. Even if it could be settled there was no thrill left there now.

Men would work only behind safe walls with no exciting explorations around the countryside. But they would be other men, this expedition would return to earth—a failure—three men short. Then to his horror Willie felt a tear begin to run down his nose.

The others must not see that, he thought desperately. He bent over his radio set, hurriedly wiping as he stooped. For something to do he dialed in the ultra-high frequency band where he and DeVoe had noticed queer static ever since the ship landed on Mars. Not everyone could hold it for the band was narrow and kept shifting frequency in a rising-and-falling pattern.

His sensitive fingers caught and held it now. To his surprise it was much louder down here in the canyon. His mind became a blessed blank as it always did when he was receiving. He listened to the thin, high whisper in his ear—bub-bub-squee-bubble-quee-bub. His eyes wandered unseeingly.

[*Turn page*]

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In a vague way they noticed the black runner circling the rocks—round and round. The wavering sound had to be followed up and down the dial in a repeating rhythm. Up and down—'round and 'round—it was several minutes before his tired brain put eye and ear together.

Then he sat up and said, "Jeepers!"

The how and why did not bother Willie—he *knew*. He had worked too long with guided missile controls to be mistaken. If the rhythm were the same for signal and beast it meant a direction control—it must mean that. Each change of frequency ordered a change in direction—of course! And what was more . . .

The Lieutenant was looking at him strangely. Willie burst out with, "What's more, we can walk away from here whenever we like! You remember that HF squeal we've been getting on Mars—DeVoe reported it yesterday? Well, I know what it is now. It's the tiger-bugs' direction control—tells 'em which way to run. Here, try it yourself, sir."

Joliffe looked puzzled but his fingers tried to follow the rise and fall of the signal—lost it, found it again, lost it. "Just what am I supposed to listen for?" he asked.

"The signal goes up and down the frequencies. Well, that tiger-bug thing circles in exact time to it—don't you get it?"

He looked sharply at Willie and tried again. Then he grunted and a faint excitement showed on his face. His fingers were twisting away, his eyes intent, when suddenly the signal rose in volume until Willie could hear it buzzing angrily out of the earpiece. The small black beast was racing after one of the horned browsers. The buzzing held a fixed frequency, grew even louder, then ceased altogether. So, Willie noticed, did the chase.

Lieutenant Joliffe rubbed his ear. "It simply *can't* be coincidence," he said. "I'll be damned! But why do you say we can walk away when we like?"

"Oh that. I think that will work. We can send out interference on the same frequencies. The set sends and receives at the same time with the same controls."

"By God, I suppose we could, Thorgess! Jam its sending station, so to speak. But what is its sending station?"

"Dunno, sir. Don't care much if it works all right."

"Well, let's try. See that one over there? Find his frequency and see what happens. Wait 'til I get these glasses focused. Now, go ahead!"

But after a minute or two Willie shook his head. "The rhythm's not the same at all," he said.

"Hunt for another signal," snapped the Lieutenant. "The frequency is probably different for each one—must be or they'd get mixed up."

WILLIE searched up and down the scale, found another and after a minute of listening he nodded. "Ready," he said and flicked the sending switch. The distant runner fell apart in full stride, melted to a black puddle on the gray dust.

"Stop sending. Let's see what they do then, Thorgess."

Willie flicked the switch. Their aimless wandering ceased and the tiger-bugs began to group themselves again into legs, the legs began to join together. The Lieutenant nodded, Willie flicked the switch once more and the legs fell apart again.

"Very good indeed, Thorgess," said the Lieutenant. "You'll get a promotion out of this even if it is your first voyage. I wish I knew how it worked though, or why. Something directs their running. Whatever it is, it must be where it can see over the shrubbery. Partway up the canyon wall, perhaps."

"Could be a boss bug with maybe extra-big antennae for sending," suggested Willie. "There'd be a different one for each of these bug-beasts. If we

could find them all and smash 'em this valley would be a swell place to live in."

They both had their glasses focused on the far slope and spent ten minutes searching it foot by foot. Twice they saw things that looked like insect antennae; once there was something that Willie said was a long stalk with two eyes on it. The Lieutenant pointed out that they might all be just oddly-shaped leaves.

"If you'll let me bring a party out tomorrow with two or three radios, I can get a fix on each sending station by cross angles," said Willie at last.

The Lieutenant said, "Yes, there *is* going to be a tomorrow after all, isn't there? A whole blessed string of them, thank God!" He grinned happily at Willie, who grinned back. Then they woke up Kruts and told him the news.

"*What!*" he yelled. "That damn little box knocks 'em down when my rifle can't! Show me—just *show* me!"

Willie made the nearest runner fall apart. Kruts sat staring at the radio. Then he asked if he could try it himself, so Willie showed him how, but Kruts could not keep the frequency tuned in.

Willie was patient but after a few minutes of it he said, "Look, Kruts, let's practise after we get back, eh? You don't seem to get the feel of the radio, somehow. Anyway I don't see why you want to learn. You can come along tomorrow if you want to, but bring your rifle—you sure handle *that* like an expert."

The Lieutenant said, "All right, let's go."

But down on the ground Willie found a complication. He couldn't see over the shrubbery. "It's no use if I can't see them," he groaned. "I'd have to be eight feet high to do it."

"Get up on my shoulders and you will be," said Kruts. "Only for cripe's sake sit easy on those bites."

Willie mounted, gripped hard with his knees to leave both hands free and they

[*Turn page*]

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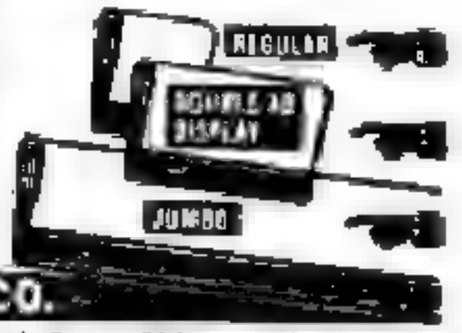

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started. He was nervous, keyed to a high pitch. It was all up to him and this was it!

There were five of the deadly things to watch for. He knew the general direction of each and exactly where to find its frequency on the radio controls. There was one now.

His fingers flew. He flicked the switch. Down it went.

There was another—and that fixed *him!*

He suddenly felt invincible. He had a dozen hands, eyes all around his head. The instant any small black shape showed, he knocked it down—it was as easy as that. Why, they were almost across! The Lieutenant was grinning and waving at the men waiting there, men who shouted and stared as if they could hardly believe their eyes.

Kruts began chanting as he marched along, "*Hup*, two, three, four. *Hup*, two, three four!"

Willie wanted to shout and chant too but his throat was all tightened up. His head seemed to soar through the sky as he rode along. It felt wonderful!

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COSMIC ENCORES

(Continued from page 6)

good writing it is, too—is being done in these two countries. Far from our importing Continental fiction, much of ours is being translated into European languages, including the Scandinavian. And a lot more is pirated.

On the whole, we are probably getting the best possible average of stories. We have had one very fine French novel DEATH OF IRON by S. S. Held (WONDER STORY ANNUAL, 1952) and others may turn up. If we spot any more good European tales we'll try and get them.

And Letters Too

In our last issue we discussed the letters editorially instead of printing them verbatim, but this time we'll let you read them yourselves and form your opinions.

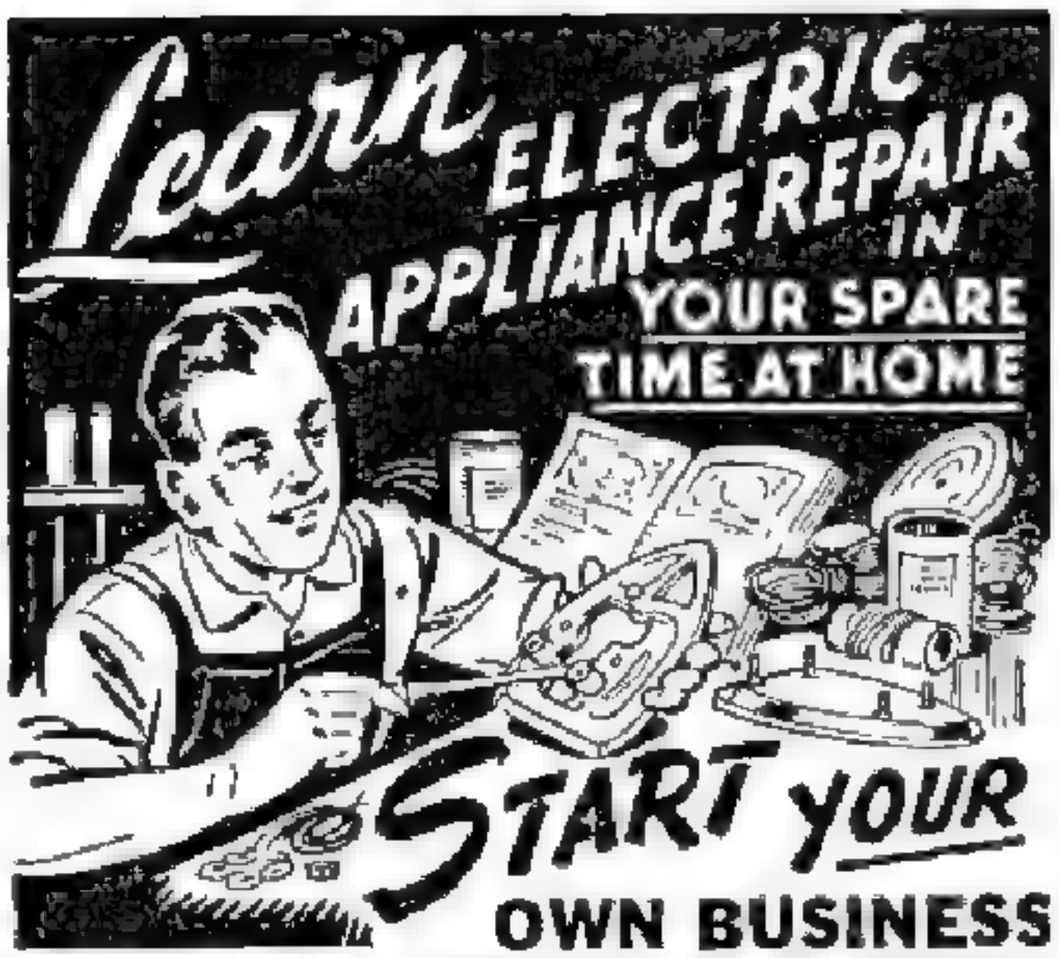
THAT MYTHICAL FAN
by Sam Moskowitz

Dear Sam: I picked up the Winter, 1952 issue of FANTASTIC STORY MAGAZINE about four hours ago and have already reread in its entirety THE EVENING STAR by David H. Keller, M. D. It still reads very strong for an oldtimer and I think you will find it is very well received

However, that is not the reason I wrote you. I was amazed and delighted by the section of "Cosmic Encores" titled "Stories New and Old." Not since the brilliant editing of Farnsworth Wright for WEIRD TALES or F. Orlin Tremaine for ASTOUNDING STORIES, and both incidents well over 12 years in the past has any editor actually come out and said that his opinion was wrong, that he would give the readers what they asked for, not what he thought was good for them. You honestly expressed your opinion that you didn't think highly of the old stories and then freely admitted that the overwhelming mass of letter opinion was against you. The common practice has been for the editor to claim that the several hundred letters which disagree with him come from the "fans" and therefore don't deserve consideration because they don't represent the "general reader."

I'm glad you realize that the "general reader" is a myth. He doesn't exist. Anybody who will buy even one science-fiction magazine regularly month after month, issue after issue is a science fiction *fan*. If a man attends the prize-fights every Monday night, no one hesitates to call him a fight-*fan*. If an individual goes to the movies religiously twice a week he is a freely admitted movie *fan*. Only in pulp science fiction do they

[*Turn page*]



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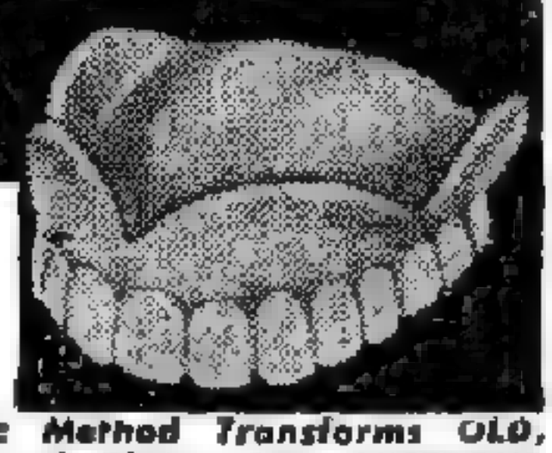

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STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, AND CIRCULATION REQUIRED BY THE ACT OF CONGRESS OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AS AMENDED BY THE ACTS OF MARCH 3, 1933, AND JULY 2, 1946 (Title 39, United States Code, Section 233) of Fantastic Story Magazine, published quarterly at Kokomo, Ind., for Oct. 1, 1951. 1. The names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Best Books, Inc., 10 East 40th St., New York, N. Y. Editor, Samuel Mines, 10 E. 40th St., New York, N. Y. Managing Editor, None. Business Manager, Harry Slater, 10 East 40th St., New York, N. Y. 2. The owner is: Best Books, Inc., 10 E. 40th St., New York, N. Y. N. L. Pines, 10 East 40th St., New York, N. Y. 3. The known bondholders, mortgagees and other security holders owning or holding 1 percent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: None. 4. Paragraphs 2 and 3 include, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting; also, the statements in the two paragraphs show the affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner. Harry Slater, business manager. Sworn to and subscribed before me this 1st day of October, 1951. Eugene Wechsler, Notary Public. (My commission expires March 30, 1952)

pretend that because a man buys science-fiction regularly he is not a fan, but a "general reader."

Are you going to cater to the newsstand "scanner"- the man who may buy a half-a dozen issues of science fiction in a life-time, or are you going to take care of your bread-and-butter, the boys who come to bat with their quarters *every* issue. Just because they don't write in doesn't mean they aren't fans. Nor does it mean their opinions differ beyond the normal range of flexibility. It is merely the editor's province to exercise good judgment as to which suggestions are worthier, not to disclaim the opitions of those who write as unrepresentative

On this issue of the Annual I think you may run into criticism. Among old-time readers of science fiction it is purely a rhetorical question to ask what was the worst novel ever printed in a science fiction magazine since time began. The answer is axiomatic: "The Death of Iron" by S. S. Held. I hope the Annual survives it.

All the Standard publications are the most readable science-fiction magazines on the market. They are printed in the largest, most attractive and readable type to be found anywheres in science-fiction today. The comfortable size of the type invites one to start a story even when you didn't think you were in the mood. Small type will eventually kill the digest size magazine. I read for entertainment, not for the optometrists.

The *original* short stories in Fantastic Story Magazine are on the average far below the short stories of STARTLING AND TWS in quality. I would prefer the comfest reprint to them.

The older stories have far more than simplicity to commend them. They *are* better stories then the new ones. Their superiority lies in a word: *Sincerity*. The modern story is written cynically, with tongue-in-cheek. It may be more adroit, more sophisticated but it is not convincing. The prime requisite of *any* fantasy is that you invest in the reader the willing suspension of disbelief. The old stories, written sincerely, carefully, give the impression first that the writer believes in what he is writing and secondly that the fantasies expressed might conceivably happen. The huge majority of modern writers don't possess this quality, and where they write a remembered story it is only because they have come up with a too-too clever gimmick. There is no ground-roots substance to them, they have taken the "wonder" out of Thrilling Wonder Stories and have as much depth as a coat of nail-polish.

Again, you are to be commended for your honest stand, and keep the stories old. Remember, the criteria should be, if you *don't* like them—the readers will! —127 *Shephard Avenue, Newark 8, N. J.*

Sam, for the kind words you're a doll. For the unkind words—well, we find it a little puzzling that you like EVENING STAR and don't like DEATH OF IRON. The latter is a mine of ideas, of good solid thinking, of wonderful highlights on humanity and its foibles. It may not have the pace of many American stories but it offers more satisfaction than most lighter novels. I have had the experience of

seeing people approach it with misgivings and remain to be fascinated by it.

I'd like to take issue with you too on your comparison of the old and new stories on the basis of sincerity. Apparently you detect a tongue-in-cheek attitude in modern stories which annoys you. Now it is true there was little humor in the old ones. Science fiction was new and science fiction was earnest and one didn't kid about such sacred things. But an old science fiction writer named Voltaire once pointed out that the deadliest weapon in the world was ridicule, and it is a weapon which many modern writers have discovered. If they come across some excrescence of civilization which needs cauterizing, they turn the acid weapon of ridicule upon it. And because they seem to jest, Sam, doesn't mean they lack *sincerity!* In fact, they may be twice as sincere as the old, fumbling, crude writer who knew only one way to tackle anything—hit it right on the head!

What we're trying to do in FANTASTIC and in the WONDER ANNUAL is simply to pick out the best stories we can find—of any era. There will always be classics which are great stories and which deserve preserving, regardless of their age. Nobody is tossing out Shakespeare because he happens to be a few hundred years old. He was sincere, I reckon.

SHORT VISIT
by Lillian Carroll

Dear Sirs: Yesterday I bought my first copy of your magazine. When I got home I found it was stuffed with old, out-of-date stories. I can buy all the old second-hand magazines I want. Need I add that my first copy will be my last? 1516 *York Ave., San Mateo, Cal.*

This gal should meet Sam Moskowitz. I don't know if you're reading this, Lillian, in view of your promise in the final sentence of your letter. But if you are, may I recommend STARTLING STORIES and THRILLING WONDER STORIES. All brand new, shiny, up-to-date, never-before-seen-the-light-of-day stories. You'll love 'em.

CORRECTION
by Mrs. H. W. S.

Dear Ed: Attila the Hun was not as large as his soldiers. Attila never grew bigger than a nine year old child and was an authentic midget. Apparently many important historians are unaware of this fact.—*Oklahoma City, Okla*

[*Turn page*]

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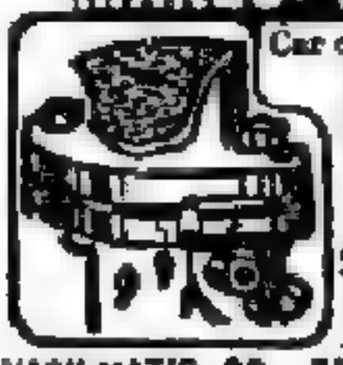

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THE OLDER THE BETTER
by Ned Reece

Dear Editor: As a regular reader of *Startling* and *TWS* I am writing to thank you for the newest additions to your Science Fiction family, *Fantastic Story* and *Wonder Story Annual*. I won't comment on either SS or TWS as I think both are the best in their field.

"Vandals of the Void" and "The Conquerors" were very good as your last two selections in FSM. "Twice in Time" in WSA was no doubt a classic but it was of too recent vintage. Please give us the older stories first, the later ones can wait a while longer.

The story I want most to read in FSM is Binder's "Dawn to Dusk". Up to now your selections leave nothing to be desired. Keep on giving us stories like those you have reprinted so far.

What about using the old Paul illustrations for these classics? He can't be beat for Interplanetary scenes. If Bergey continues to do the covers have him paint scenes like those new covers that feature SS and TWS, they are masterpieces. I always thought Bergey could paint if he would take a little more trouble with his brush.

My hopes are that in the near future FSM will come out six times a year and WSA will turn into a Quarterly. Please keep all new stories out of both mags for there are so many old ones that need to be reprinted. If you ever exhaust the supply then you can use the new ones.

Thanks again for four fine magazines. They head the SF field.—*Rt. 3, Box 68-A, Kannapolis, N. C.*

It would be a heck of a lot cheaper for us to use the old Paul illustrations than to make new drawings, but in most, if not all cases, we no longer have the original art work and you can't often get a good reproduction of even a line cut by picking it off pulp paper. But the stuff being currently-turned out by Bergey, Schomburg and Emsh needs no apology from anyone. As to stories, we agree, there are lots of good ones which deserve to be brought back. Thousands of new readers will get to see them for the first time, whereas otherwise they might be lost. Incidentally, guess what's scheduled for the next issue of FANTASTIC. Not too old, but a genuine classic just the same—SLAN, by van Vogt.

CHAFF FROM THE WHEAT
by W. Reed

Sir: I am not what you'd call an avid reader of science fiction but I do read them quite often. Since this is the first time I've written to a "read-

ers' department" you can guess it is something special.

First is the fact that your Fall edition was the first magazine I've read in which it was not necessary to separate the chaff from the wheat. All the stories were more or less original in treatment or theme. With honesty I can't say any were outstanding. (I come across one or two a year.) But the overall average was so good that I rate the whole issue as the best

Secondly, I appreciate the absence of a semi-nude female on the cover. I often regret that I have to pass up many a good story because I feel that if a publisher has to resort to sex to sell science fiction, I want no part of the magazine. (On this point I could enlarge but let it suffice to say that in the long run it always pays to appeal to the better side of the reading public.)

I won't say which story was the best, but the COSMIC PANTAGRAPH by Hamilton had a couple of new twists and VERMIN was good.

I meant to mention that the stories were all free of dirt. It's not that I'm a fanatic or a woman-hater, but just that anyone can get tired of the trash being published and still believe that science fiction can be literature.—*Havelock, North Carolina*

We'll go along with you to this extent—just dragging in sex for its own sake cheapens a story. And in such cases it actually sounds dirty; it is a foreign and obtrusive element. But where sex is a logical development of a situation in a story it is just as cheap to pretend it doesn't exist, as we have been doing for years, to prevaricate and hedge and deny its existence. That is dishonest and for my dough is a worse sin than being a little frank about one of the major emotions which dominate man—and woman.

PRO AND CON
by Jan Romanoff

Dear Editor: There have been many arguments over the reprint question. One of the best against reprints is the fact that most of the stories of ten to fifteen years ago are so stereotyped that they are unpalatable to the old fan. This is not so with newcomers to science fiction. Since they don't know s.f. too well anyhow, they accept this as standard stuff. And isn't it a poor introduction to such a fascinating type of literature?

Of course there are exceptions. The thing then for the editor to do is to print the exceptions instead of anything he happens to own the copyright on

Even though I am against reprints as a whole, I must say that FANTASTIC has chosen wisely in selecting its novels. As evidence I offer:

1. THE HIDDEN WORLD—Hamilton, 1950
2. EXILE OF THE SKIES Vaughn, Summer 1950

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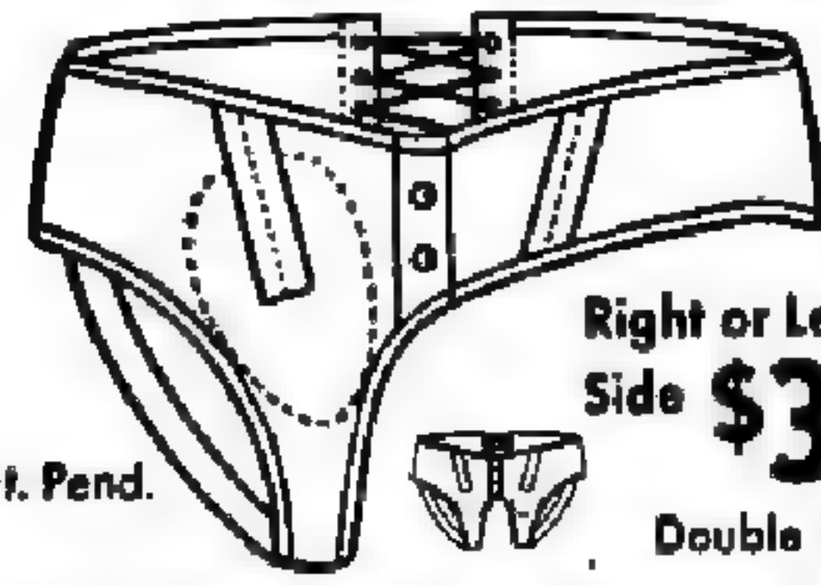

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3. IN CAVERNS BELOW—Coblentz, Fall 1950
4. VANDALS OF THE VOID—Walsh, Spring 1951
5. THE CONQUERORS Keller, Summer, 1951

Looking back over the list you will notice tha there was only one novel omitted. That gives you a score of five out of six, way above par for any mag, reprint or otherwise.

However, I am sorry to say that you haven' been as careful with your short stories. Up to the Summer 1951 issue, (and including it) you ra a total of twenty-six shorts. Of these twenty-six I would say only four approach the quality of current stories. Of course many of your short stories were new ones. (Under five years old.) But ever these did not compare favorably.

Hope I haven't sounded overly critical. As a whole I'd say keep up your novel standards and raise your short stories.—*2600 S. Western, Lomita, Cal.*

Present policy is to present a novel and possibly a novelet which is pretty carefully culled from the better works of the past, and to use brand new stories for the rest of the magazine. All the shorts in this issue have never seen print before and assuming that you differ diametrically from Sam Moskowitz in your appreciation of the modern, you should be able to draw some valuable inferences from your reaction to these stories. Anyway—I was going to say, "let us know," but I'm afraid you will.

OMNIVOROUS
by Mrs. E. R. Barnes

Dear Sir: This is a first letter and I would appreciate it if you would publish it. I am a housewife with four small children but I still find time to read, mostly at night. I was introduced to FANTASTIC about three years ago and have been an avid reader ever since.

My only trouble is that I read very fast and the supply is limited so that I have trouble finding reading material. I would be very grateful for some old issues, at a reasonable price. So if anyone has some to sell, I'll be glad to buy them.—514 N. *2nd Ave., Warsaw, Ills.*

All you collectors who've been meaning to clean out the attic—here's your chance to help a fast reader. And Mrs. Barnes, don't say we didn't warn you—duck!

ANALOGOUS DINOSAUR
by Edward Seibel

Dear Editor: In regard to my letter in the Fall issue—slithered out of that one, didn't you? Oh,

well, I've got plenty of time to set up a few more for you to sweat over—or rather around.

Sometimes I wonder—I have a deep suspicion your shape is analogous to a dinosaur's and you type your editorials and answers to readers with your toes while you do a multitude of other things with your hands. Still, we could lop off the tail, eh?

Perhaps—but no, you wouldn't. In case you're curious I was thinking of that story in TWS by William Tenn entitled THE JESTER. With a tail like that you could—yerp! yerp!

I see I won't trip you up in COSMIC ENCORES this time; in fact I can't help but unhappily agree with your literal use of astrology and astronomy, but if you wish to wander off into the abstruse semantics of the correlations with your usage, I could stab you a little anyhow. Please note usage one drags you right back to astronomy, practical astronomy, since usage one is marked obs.; you must realize that today astrology is sometimes considered synonymous with charlatanry; i.e., obviously implicated.—*Box* 445, *Olivehurst, Calif.*

There was more, much more to this garrulous missive, but in mercy we cut it short. All the abuse above was directed at Merwin and apparently occasioned by a squib Sam wrote in which he pointed out with glee that astrology, the despised, was now being regarded with some astonishment by scientists of RCA, who have apparently discovered that the movements of the planets have some effect upon the weather. Hence, reasoned Sam, why not therefore upon Man?

Sorry Sam isn't around to trade insults with von Seibel, but he had already taken off when this letter arrived.

Well, hope you've had a good time, everybody. We'll see you in the next issue.

—*The Editor*

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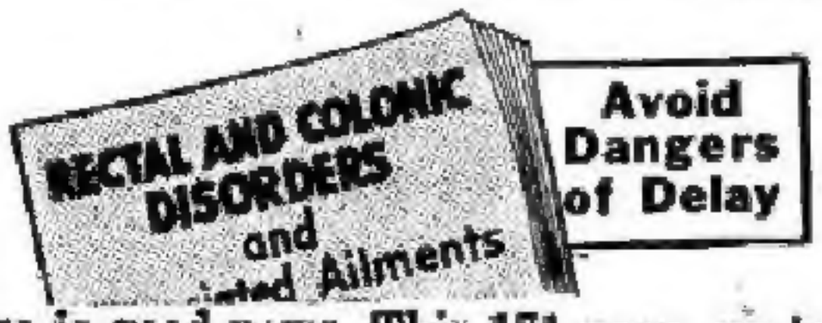

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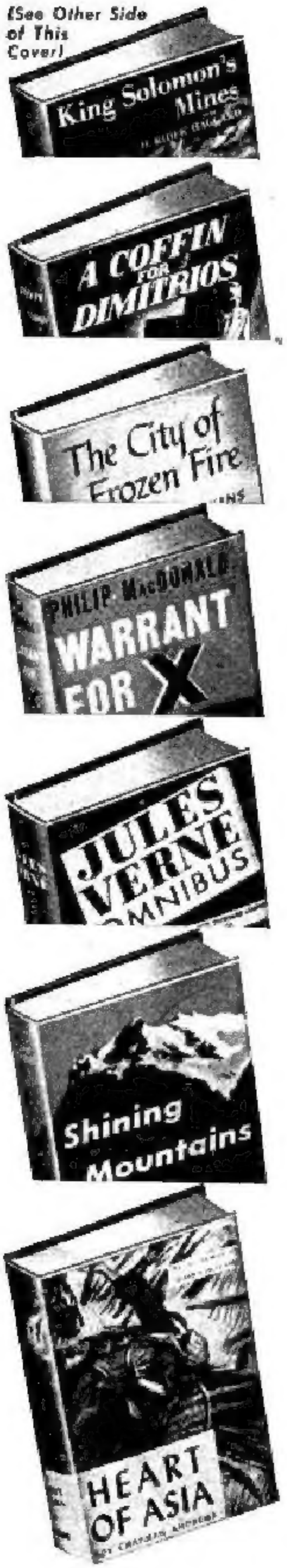

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